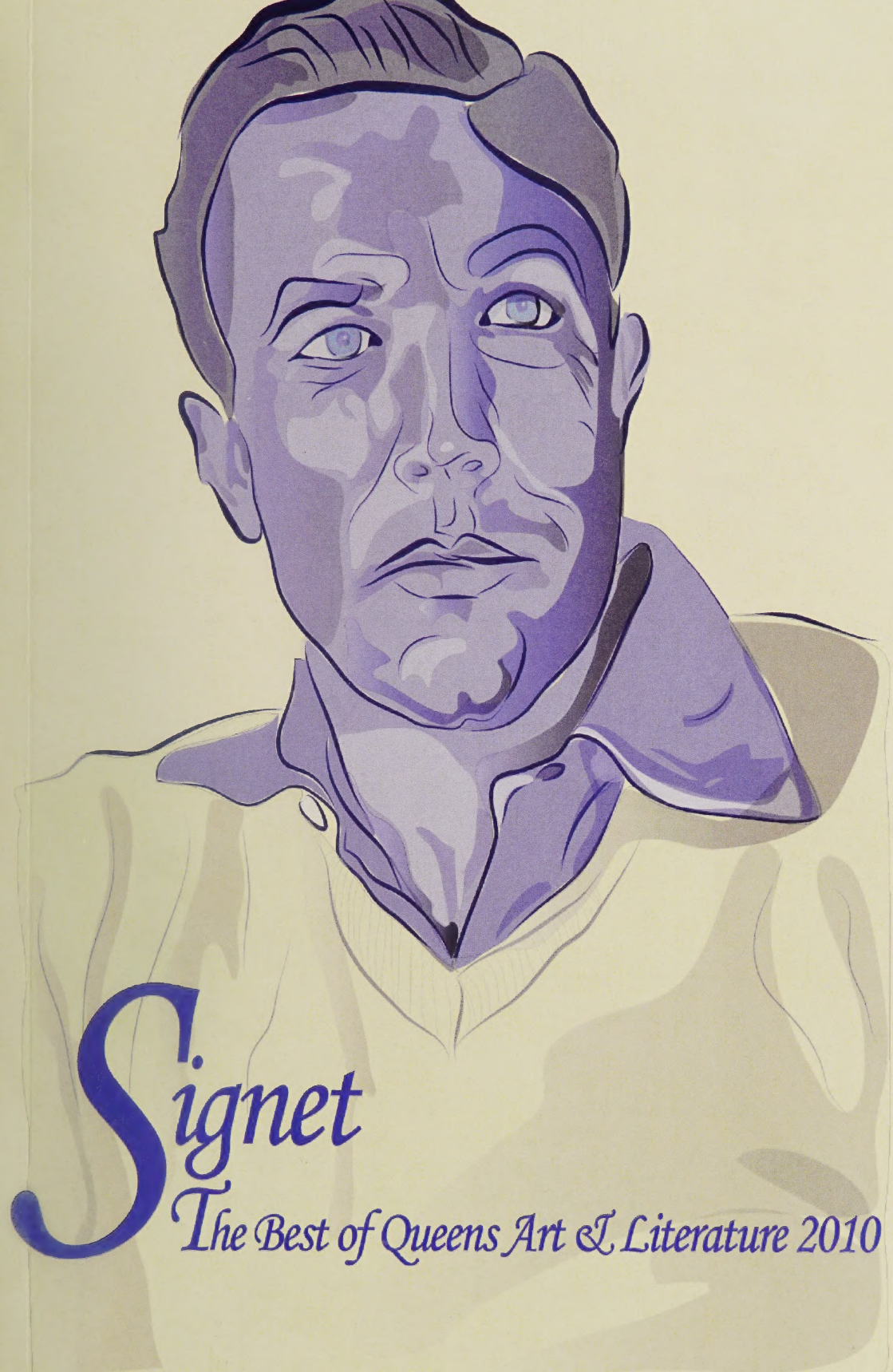


Signet

The Best of Queens Art & Literature 2010

Signet is an annual journal of art & literature published at Queens University of Charlotte. All of the works within its pages were written, compiled, edited, drawn, photographed, sketched, spit, or sculpted by Queens University students, faculty and staff. .

Masthead:

Editor-In-Chief:
Janeen Bradely

Editor:
Justin Lafreniere

Fiction Editor:
Faith Lippard

Nonfiction Editor:
Joel Ferdon

Poetry Editor:
Melissa Wilds

Art Editor:
Katy Meniates

Contributing Editors:
Travis Mullis,
Sydney Zurlein,
Amanda Martin,
Nicole Beno Pietrantonio,
Lauren DeReese,
and Other Club Members

Faculty Advisor: Professor S. Craig Renfroe, Jr.

Special Thank to: Queens SGA, the Queens English Department, Jolly Rogers Publishing, David Owens-Hill, Cathy Smith Bowers and all those who made this magazine possible by supporting us and helping along the way. And an extra special thanks to those who make this magazine possible: the authors, artists, and readers of Queens University of Charlotte. Thanks.

Cover Art: "Gene" by Nicole Beno Pietrantonio

Signet

Table of Contents

Amanda Martin: Interview with Cathy Smith Bowers 5

Poetry:

Faith Lippard 11
Natalie Stewart 12-13
Anastasia Drapievsky 14
Justin Lafreniere 15-20
Breanna Stallings 21-24
Scott Simmons 25-26
Travis Mullis 27-29
Molly Warren 30
Dion Beary 31-33
Mary Miles Davis 34-35
Bonnie Stoffel 36
Dharna Macedo 37
Whitney Holbrook 38
Sydney Zuerlein 39-40
Amanda Martin 41
Lauren DeReese 42
Kathleen Wile 43

Fiction:

Lauren DeReese 46
Mary Miles Davis 47
Faith Lippard 48-61
Travis Mullis 62-90
Justin Lafreniere 91-114
Dion Beary 115-125
Breanna Stallings 126-129

Nonfiction:

Sarah Schoenshals 133-134
Justin Lafreniere 135-147
Sydney Zuerlein 148-153
Travis Mullis 154-156
Dion Beary 157-161
Victoria Moreland 162-166

Art:

Breanna Stallings	169-176
Nicole Beno Pietrantonio	177
Nathan Fields	178
Justin Lafreniere	179-180

From the Editors:

Dear Reader,

If I could do it all over, I'd do it all the same. But differently. This is the new beginning. Of something. I'm not exactly sure what of, what that something is, so let's refrain from the general accusations of who did what to whom until we figure out what could actually be done.

Yours Always,
Justin Lafreniere
Editor

I must admit, this is my first editor's note, and I can't quite figure out what to say. I am not a very eloquent individual, nor am I exceedingly intelligent, insightful, or humerous. I don't have any great wisdom to offer to aspiring writers. Hell, I'm in the same little boat really. The staff members and faculty that I should thank are the type of people who don't do what they do for our gratitude and recognition. I can't tell you anything about the writers and artists featured in this issue because I think you should experience their work yourself. I could elaborate on how much the process of creating this publication has taught me, how invaluable the skills I've learned will be to me, or how much I've grown as a leader, blah, blah, blah, insert Queens motto here, etc. But in the interest of brevity, I'll restrain myself. I guess I'll just thank you all for this great opportunity, for submitting your work, for supporting the arts, and all that jazz. So thanks, and I hope you enjoy.

Best,
Janeen Bradley

Winners of the 2010 Writing Awards

Marjorie Blankenship Melton Creative Writing Award in Nonfiction:
Dion Beary: "Virgin"

Marjorie Blankenship Melton Creative Writing Award in Fiction:
Faith Lippard: "While the Music Plays"

Paul Newman Poetry Award:
Justin Lafreniere: "There is Always Great Heartbreak in a Full Ballroom"

Amanda Martin

Interview with 2010 North Carolina Poet Laurate Cathy Smith Bowers

Cathy Smith Bowers is a poet whose artistically crafted poems and teaching abilities have flourished throughout the Queens community. Teachers and students alike admire her for her intelligence and passion for writing. She currently teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Queens.

She earned a BA and MAT in English at Winthrop University in neighboring Rock Hill, SC, and continued her education doing graduate work in Modern British Poetry at Oxford University in England.

Bowers' poetry has landed in literary magazines such as The Kenyon Review, Poetry, The Georgia Review, The Atlantic Monthly, and The Southern Review.

She has published three collections of poetry with Iris Press including Traveling in Time of Danger, 1999; A Book of Minutes, 2004; and The Candle I Hold Up To See You, 2009. With Texas Tech University Press she has one collection titled The Love That Ended Yesterday in Texas, 1992.

Most recently she was named the 2010 Poet Laureate of the State of North Carolina. She also received the FB Fuqua Distinguished Educator Award while serving as poet-in-residence at Queens in 2002.

Amanda Martin: What was your first reaction when you found out you had been chosen Poet Laureate?
Cathy Smith Bowers: I said "Oh my God can I call you back after I run outside and scream a few times?" I would wake up in the middle of the night and think "Do what?!" I remember thinking it was just impossible because North Carolina has some of the finest poets in the United States.

AM: What made you choose to work with Queens and what do you enjoy most about it?
CSB: I had applied to five schools around the area surrounding my hometown of Lancaster, SC, and Queens offered me one adjunct remedial English class, and I said absolutely. I can say that Queens changed my life. It is one of the best things that ever happened to me, and I say that with honesty.

AM: What are your memories or impressions of Signet?
CSB: I was just always so thrilled to see poems in there that I'd seen worked on and revised, and revised again. Then in the end there's a little jewel in there. I just like the energy that Signet brings to the campus-wide community. I'm always very proud to see my students work; they're like my little grand-babies.

AM: How does your timeline play out when putting together something you've written?
Cathy Smith Bowers: For me there were four, five, and seven years between books. It usually takes about four years. It was easier once I became aware of a certain theme I was working with. I wasn't writing individual poems, I was writing books. It was a slow process for me.

AM: What influenced you to begin writing?
CSB: It was a childhood longing. Both of my parents loved language and the beauty of language, and I think that's something I took from them. I always had a longing to write poetry because I think it's the highest of the arts.

AM: Who is your favorite writer?
CSB: Gerard Manley Hopkins. He remains the poet closest to my heart and

mind.

AM: What do you think is the most rewarding thing about writing?

CSB: I think the most rewarding thing is to see something on paper that you know you're not capable of writing. Knowing that there's something else there, something going on that is outside of you, is astonishing. It's great.

AM: What advice would you give to young, aspiring writers?
CSB: I would say to see writing as how you live your life. If it's even a choice that you can make I would say give it up, but for me it was a way of life. You should read and immerse yourself in the art. You're going to eat, you're going to breath, and you're going to be a poet everyday. Don't fret too much over whether anything comes of the writing or not. Publishing doesn't make you a poet, writing poems makes you a poet, but it's hard at first to believe that because we take rejection so personally.

AM: What are your plans for the future?
CSB: My plan is to reestablish a routine for my own writing. With teaching this semester and Poet Laureate, I've set it aside. I plan to continue the MFA teaching at Queens and do my job as Poet Laureate to shine a light on new and aspiring writers, but my main goal is to get some balance back and get into my own writing again.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025 with funding from
North Carolina Digital Heritage Center

https://archive.org/details/signet20102010quee

Poetry

Faith Lippard

Kris

The pristine, glistening white walls.
Half of her mind swelling with helium,
floating to the clouds as she laughs.
Her body growing thinner
than the excuses;
random blips
of television dialogue,
lip-gloss, and popsicle flavors. "Wait,
what? Dude! Ha-ha," spitting
from her mouth like watermelon seeds.
Ballerina pendant
dancing on her collarbone.
Crushed pink silk soles
and classical soothing rhythms.
Strolling in the park, hanging on
the swings. Chasing children
in the sandbox as the sun
competes with the shine of her hair.
Reflective white Honda
belting notes of Katy and Britney.
Fresh Febreze fumes and soap scented,
tanning-bed baked skin.
Dry toxic snow blowing in her nose.
Red Bull spilling from aluminum.
Holding her breath for a second,
before giggling with a smile.

Natalie Stewart

Oxygen

A pop of the musky cork
sends the wine reaching for breath.
A coveted liquid flows
making its way to the glass.
Oh sweet air!
Swirling the glass, the aromas begin to escape:
chocolate, black cherry, French oak, even tobacco.
The thick burgundy begins its travels,
from the crystal rim,
to a pool of ten thousand droplets
come to life since their escape
from bottled imprisonment.
Here they now sit
each eager for the ride.

Natalie Stewart

Open

The cold night leaves its iron-clad bark open,
With liberating dreams to run naked in the Central Park open.

Stopped in her self-indulgent tracks,
She finally gives in to the patriarch, open.

Refusing to quietly drift away into nothingness,
Her body emerges from the pitch-dark open.

Freedom is coming here tonight,
So sing out loud with the lark, open.

Shall word of his return ever arrive?
Each day she prays, as she tears the postmark open.

I watch as Natalie escapes the blanket of safety,
She stares off into the endless white stark open.

Anastasia Drapievsky

Logs

"You," I said, "you have been chosen." And with that
they bowed, and with a loud cry their roots were ripped.
Severed apart, they were reunited at
the stock. For a year or more they waited
until I came back. Though their dignity was stripped,
they still kept quiet, their hope abated.

But as I carried them to a pit, they saw
their mortal enemy, my friend. He leaped, crackling
and I sacrificed them within reach of his claws.
They tried to scream, but with several cracks
He silenced them. Greedily, he cackled.
I grinned as the fire ate them with loud smacks.

I leaned back contentedly, jingling my foot and
observing the fire. I looked up to the skies
And the warmth enticed my cold hand
up to the fire, smiling at the logs' cries.

Justin Lafreniere

Poetry

is an agnostic walking through a contemporary church.
He has chapped lips, sinner's lips, lips
that have kissed too many black-dressed girls
against the brick of dive bars. Poetry is a man who goes
where Purim is every night, celebrated in four-star
fast food halls and full moon streetlights
where everyone stays sober until they can't drink anymore.
He has soft fingers from cuddling loose women
who he leaves without name, with only memory.
The palms of Poetry are calloused from sliding rough rope
into hangman's knots, shoelace knots, things
not of this world. His calluses are from pushing men
in front of automobiles, from thinking of working.
Poetry is this: a hedonistic and godless man lying in state
with an open coffin shrouded while his widow reads prayers
from the Torah and sings psalms in a voice like an angel's
car alarm. Poetry is people staring at Poetry, that godless agnostic,
that loving bastard, as he walks in to pray for his death.

Justin Lafreniere

Waves

A man in just his light blue jeans, blue eyed,
watches the wasteland of the fine white shore.
Like poppies strewn across the sea, the sky's

dappled white clouds pass over him. The roar
of waves, their churl against the crag, the foam
reminds him of a field, a place no more

nor less lonesome. Monarchs of monochrome
and technicolor never set to land would float
past. His dogtags dangled. He, alone,

saw the planes. He watches now a sailboat.
The aircraft dived, bombs like concussive trumpets
sounded. His platoon, bodies blackened and bloated.

He wept, he knelt over their silhouettes.
He comes, in fall, avoids the fields. He listens
to them, so hushed. His tags fall into the wet.

Justin Lafreniere

There is Always Great Heartbreak in a Full Ballroom

My shadow is waltzing with himself
down vacant hallways on the third floor
of a Boston hotel. He has always been
a crepuscular creature and the antithesis
of Alice's cat; he has no smile but plenty of face
and his footsteps are counted out to tragicomedy
in four-four time. Bounding over sidewalk cracks
and potholes, careening through a chain fence
on to some other side of the neighbor's lawn, to where
the grass that isn't quite so blue. In a station
waiting for a telegraph, he tells a man about his time
in this poem, how he was the star of a penny dreadful
that sold for three easy payments of a pence and the foot
of some unlucky rabbit. Sending himself along the wires
to the end of the line, he jitterbugs with a buffalo,
then shoots himself up like a roman candle. Floating
slowly out of the city, his form goes westward over
red clouds and under lit streets. But when the music
in his head stops, like a record pulled off the needle,
he will look up with sad eyes, knowing the feast of fools
is over. Yes, my shadow is riding a freight train back to me
so I can hold him in my arms while he weeps.

Justin Lafreniere

This Poem

This poem is a paper boat sailing
to Byzantium. Farther she drifts on waves
until she vanishes down in watery vales.
I should have given her a mast to save
that heavy wind. Her folded rudder may fail
and no bottle was broke against her white
folded bow. When the world was flat,
monsters swallowed ships that fell o'er twilight,
over the map's ink edge. Maybe they sat
forgotten, lost from death until the hydra's bite.
Without a chart, a crew, with only a wish
this paper poem floats the roads of fish
to Byzantium, to look for readers of gold.
I fear she will fall off the face of the earth.

Justin Lafreniere

Warzones

I have been down into the trenches of the human mind.
My feet slipped and when I fell, black mud covered my hands.
The shells bursting shook the ground, cratered meadows.
A day and a year, a row and a mile, in front and behind me,
the ground gives way to receive the munitions.
Sometimes you never hear their screams.

I was not a conscript, an unlucky lottery number
drawn by the Fates. I wanted to serve;
I volunteered to be in these trenches.
The cross on my arm is the color of the blood
from the corpses of strangers I was too late to save.
They had no time to train me. They gave me packs
of morphine, of bandages, of pathetic embracing hugs
and the text of prayers for the dead.

They shipped me off to different theaters
while they shipped back cedar, pine, bones in a wood box.
They shipped back folded flags.

Sometimes in the trenches I could watch
the sky and imagine it was peaceful,
that no clouds tore open and bled from artillery
piercing their vastness. There were hills
where even the grass became cross at my presence.
It would stand on end and sharpen,
pulling the cold wind through the holes in my boots.

The worst battlefields were the flat open fields.

There were the bodies of those I looked up to,
those someones who were where they fell

for no other reason than god let them choose
to be there. I've walked past bodies. I've fallen on corpses,
fumbling to regain myself before their stench and disease
and their harrowing memories overtook me.

I fell among Van Gogh and Plath, Wolfe,
Luca, Hemmingway and thousands anonymous,
all the failed students of Camus, lost druggies, the dead citizens
of a Prozac nation. Once, before reveille, I heard
Styron screaming out Dante's Commedia
in the throes of his wounded madness.

I found you among the bodies, leaning against a wall
made more of human remains than of dirt.
You were holding on to your helmet and rifle and crying,
shell-shocked and scared. When my fingers, grubby with dirt
and white from the cold, touched you, you flinched.
I knelt down to hold you and to pray. Your beautiful face
turned toward my hand and blonde hair fell
like sunshine against the whistling of a shell.
In the reflection of your dogtags, I saw myself crying
but somehow alive amidst the ruin. Alison,
you tilted your green eyes upward and almost smiled,
I raised my face towards the vesper sky
and so we came forth, and once again beheld the stars
as I laid with you in silence until the fighting stopped.

Breanna Stallings

To Be or Not To Be

I sit behind the brick piles,
with a friend dressed in spikes,
inked from neck to toes.
He is screaming Shakespear,
waving the bottle in his hand,
and with the other fist in the air,
"I chose to be!"
He shouts forth with
alcohol stained words into the
crispness of the darkened sky.

The moon bleaches my skin clean,
fresh and white again, like your headlights
driving away. I can see myself becoming
light and making the most vital
of decisions.

It's January now, and the blossoms
have already begun to peek from
under hooded heads. Pink stars
shining against the nighttime.
The frost is setting in quick, and it
takes up company with us at 3 a.m.
Tomorrow, the dogwood buds will no longer be.

Breanna Stallings

Roses

Soft shadowed pitfalls hidden under
blankets; small frail wisps of fabric
that so gently graze necks in
tiny whispering breaths that are almost
unheard. Yellowing edges show age
and longevity, like books touched
and stained and forgotten about and remembered again
and read and read and read.
Studied and never mastered, defined but never understood.
A little pulp-like pulsing heart, beating red
and weary, but safe inside the forty lips, all separated
and segregated among social stigma. Stigmata veins,
fluid but calm like water stained and still.
The sun rises from its core, a deep rustic red
on the edges and then, floating downwards, just like Alice,
to the pink whimsical middle-Earth where sense is absent
and scent is fragrant and animated into friends.
Both death and love's images intertwined, all cousins
of different colors and creeds. Greatly seen is
the rose of nature, but hidden mysterious is the rose
of the soul; under petal-barracks and shielding thorns
we are all alerting each other to wake up and smell...
ourselves.

Breanna Stallings

Moonchild

I still wear your necklace,
the one lost for a while
between couch cushions
and heated moments of unrest.

It reminds me of night,
because I am the moonchild,
and it whispers to me softly.
the silver speaks words
I can barely understand
and am desperate to hear.

What does friendship mean?
I didn't return your call today,
out of concious awareness.
yet I think of you often.

In the depths of night, between
humid sheets of condensation
I wrap myself in the essence
of your soul, miles away, it is
roped tightly around my heart.
Squeezing and secure, there is
nothing I'd rather pretend to love.

Breanna Stallings

Bittersweet

The ceiling is a constellation of blackened stars,
and the paint, self-conscious of its own peeling,
takes a shadowy hiding place behind gossamer webs.
Mementos magnetically cling to the refrigerator,
desperate to forever present a grade-school me.
The old grandmother sink cries softly and quietly,
creating rust and wrinkles where once there was sheen.
She is the epitome of all the women in this house.
Even the beauty queens of our county have come in,
and ages later, have left, decrepit and wasted away.
The final cleaning lady comes through, ripping
down memories and stuffing them into a trash bag.
Her checkered green dress is dirty and her bulbous
figure leaves a looming impression of distaste.
She sweeps away dead insects with her weathered broom.
It is good to know that not everything will spend
its eternity here, not even roaches and not even flies.

Scott Simmons

Fire

I put it all in.
Soddy logs and loose leaves
crumbling away from their fall crispness
into the dust to dust of which all marriages are made.

To feed these flames,
I throw in more.

The fire eats up newspapers
turning politics, war and death into light.
Fliers, adverts, the sediment of Sunday magazines,
the loose leafs of note scribbled pages
balled up into fists that punch into flame
and then fall back into fragile black
still remembering their ink tattoos.

The heat gets bolder scalding my face.
After turning, it's now burning
my back and painting me in the invisible dust of dead things.

I get excited, just like the flames
and toss in bottles and cans
just to see what happens.

I watch plastic shriek away into Munch's dreams.

I throw in more.

With the hysteria of women and witches on trial,
I turn to books.

Britannica, college texts and then the poetry.
helpless bending paperbacks of poems.

I send in Collins and Dylan,
push James Dickey and Joyce into the light.
A signed copy of Kooser, then Bell
and the rich pages of Swinburne.

I bring them all down from the cannoned shelf.
The flames leap higher, most happiest with these published pages.
Sending poetry up through smoke,
Back to where it all certainly comes from.

Travis Mullis

1812 Overture at 80 Miles an Hour

...and it rips apart the night,
hurdling through the darkness towards the light.
my great white shark and me,
riding along the ribbon of highway
stretched out in front of us like an etherized patient.
shaking the cobwebs from the underpasses,
I REMEMBER.

I wrote these words when I was still a child (and maybe I still am),
"There's nothing more to write, it has all been said!"
Tchaikovsky bellows out of my speakers and I know,
I WAS WRONG.

I am galavanting with my thoughts like
the wolfman through black and white moon light.
my dreams, my words, my lines,
seep through the floorboards at the crescendo
and hurl themselves into the nightscape.
I SMILE AND KNOW AND AWAY THEY GO.

Travis Mullis

The Lights are Out on Mt. Olympus

The gods have put up for sale signs in our front lawns,
pedaling us out to devils licking their chops in the shadows.
We are an attic sale.
We will be sold to the highest bidder.

Atlas, he shrugged.
Zeus dipped his lightning bolts in a rain barrel.
Aphrodite got a breast reduction.
Athena stripped naked and curled up next to her lover.
Hephaestus, poor Hephaestus weeps at his anvil.
Demeter has sowed her fields with salt.

Poseidon's called in a plumber to drain the seas.
Ares has hung his sword on the wall and
settled down in his favorite chair.
Hera drowned her children in a bathtub.
Hermes blew up the post office.
Dionysus beer bonged one too many bottles of wine.
Apollo carried away the sun in a U-Haul.

The days have run out.
The demons sit silently on their haunches offstage,
waiting for the curtain to drop.

Settle in Homo sapiens,
the lights are out on Mt. Olympus,
and Hades howls just beyond your bedroom door.

Travis Mullis

You, Too

You, too, sang America.

You were and are my darker brother.
But they don't send you to eat in the kitchen no more
When company comes, Langston Hughes,
But you laugh,
And you eat well,
And you grow strong.

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow,
You'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody dares
Say to you,
"Eat in the kitchen",
Now.

Besides,
They've seen how beautiful you are
And are ashamed.

They've rolled up their
Stars and Bars,
And they've hidden away,
Their burning crosses.

Besides,
They've wrapped you in their
American flags,
And anointed your head with holy water
Because -

Langston Hughes, you, too, are America.

Molly Warren

Waning Storm

I am the deep black ocean and the warm summer rain
The comfort of a cold breeze,
First-time snow when the world turns dark,
The embrace of a warm winter coat, lent to you by a friend,
A field for stargazers, prayer-makers.

I am the covert operations of a love-warrior's yearning,
Logic behind emotion, a simple answer,
I am not and never will be,
And I'll tell you to just accept it.

I am the bloodied teethmarks you put on your own lip:
Images you see at second glance
and the shadow of His light.

I am a lifetime of philosophies written in one night
But never finished.

I am the deep black ocean and the warm summer rain.

Dion Beary

Ten By Fourteen: To, For, and Inspired By Whitley Carole Holbrook

I: Genesis, the Middle Part, and Epilogue
The days grew stale and
Lonesome. But the smoothness of your
Cheek is refreshing, and the sounds of
Conversation cause the dullness to
Vibrate, like each little word is a
Pebble in my mind's pond; and you are
Overflowing always, oceans. My
Movements are fixed: towards you.
And only you. And only thoughts of you.

II: Perfect and Illogical
What we have here is a case of infantile
Love. Why is it that
Childishness is regarded as something to
Avoid? I'm nurtured by our unrepentant
Emotion, our lack of
Social acceptability rocks me to
Sleep, developing heart planted firmly on
Over-priced cribs, staring up at some spinning collection of
Junk, or what other, more grown-up people call
Junk. Perfect and illogical, wholly
Human, we are.

III: Why We Argue
We trade words like baseball cards.
We sling fake insults, pretending to conquer Goliath.
We swear like the worst of sinners.
We contradict ourselves, reverse old
Positions in hopes of winning
New arguments.

I want to win, but not for the sake of
Proving you wrong, but to
Impress you with my
Never ending wit, with my
Way with words, and my
Charm, but you match me,
Verb for verb,
Metaphor for metaphor,

Stories for poems. And you outpace me. I've never loved
Losing arguments more than when they're at your tongue.
God, I want to spend forever trying to leave you
Speechless.

IV: Swillow Pt. 2
Swillow:
Verb - To lay next to a person who
Time cannot control, so every
Second feels like forever, and every
Eternity passes more quickly than a
Blink of their green/hazel eyes, to
Love someone even if they
Hog the blankets, to sleep all night
Together, even though neither of you can really
Sleep all that well with another person in the
Bed, to just let your feet touch, to quote
Lil' Wayne and Nicki Minaj and
Sarcastically brag about having more
Swag than her, to cry and be
Cried to when everything seems a little too hard, to
Getting up ten minutes after you've laid down because
She wants you to brush your teeth, not because your
Breath stinks, but because
She legitimately cares about your having
Healthy teeth.
To be you
And she can be her
But to me greater than either of you were
Alone, before "each" became coupled with

"other."
It's like cuddling, but not at all like cuddling,
Because I'd cuddled before you
But I can't imagine swillowing
Without imagining your
Smile, breath, skin, nose, fingertips, laugh,
Person.

V: Acrostic
When all the 9:00AM alarm clocks finally stop raising their
Hands, and we can no longer go down stairs and find free
Ice waiting for us, paid for by
The school, I honestly believe that our voices will still match, our
Languages will still be understood, and we will still be we.
Endings are actually beginnings, someone once said to me,
You never really die, but you're always growing wiser.

Mary Miles Davis

Leah

Cleverness rummages around in her head;
She fidgets with her issued cotton;
Vaulting the chasm of memories, long and short.

Eyes still twinkle while contemporaries' grow milky;
She doesn't know,
And she knows she doesn't know.

Smiling, she makes small talk;
The weather and lunch fare.
Who was that nice young man?

Did she give herself away?
She must know him;
Maybe she'll think of it later.

The gems were mined
From her mind, like the coal
Her father pulled from Appalachia.

Memories stroll
Down the empty lane,
Locked tight, inside the life
She still lives and cannot share.

Her loss is shared,
Her memories, mourned.
I am of her, I do not know
Myself.

Mary Miles Davis

Richard

He's always in motion
Tattered tennis shoes
Stride with purpose,
Down sidewalks.

Strings from his pants-legs cut
Off at the ankles, tickle
The tops of his shoes.

He tramps through the sunny,
Affluent little town; his town.
Dirty pants-legs rise
To connect with a loose fitting, torn
T-shirt that hangs on his boney frame.

"It's a nice day today, ain't it?" he asks
No one in particular. Sunken cheeks,
Missing teeth, his feet lead him
To the local diner.

"I believe these are the best
potato chips I've ever had," pacing,
He addresses the room at large.

Neatly pressed Mothers hold
Pink children a little closer.
Kindly old couples in boutique polyester
Smile wanly, and look away.

A thin, gray plaid shirt hangs
Unbuttoned, over his torn t-shirt.
His sleeve covers the bottle as he pulls
On the last swill.

"I think I'm ready for another one,"
He announces to a passing
Waitress. "I'm feeling this one,
But not really." His eyes sparkle,
His smile is broad.

Bonnie Stoffel

The Masons

In this year we will remember teachers
Who loved to teach and were beloved
by generations stretching back through time,
Who walked these halls:
teachers and students
- the bricks of which this place is built

And in this year we will call the roll
and tell the stories
of presidents and leaders
and donors and patrons
- in gratitude.

And some of us will give a nod
to all those unremembered kin
who paid the bills and kept the lists -
without whose lives this place would not have been.

Who never marched to music played in May.
But clapped for all the rest
that never could have been
without their hands
- the masons of the school.

Dharna Macedo

That Damn Road

Driving down the highway, we headed south away from
The cold white north. The road unspooled ahead,
road and mountains, mountains and road kill.
In and out of sleep on that thirteen hour drive from
home, headed to the great unknown
of southern sweet tea and cornbread.
That whole drive all I could see, was the back of my father's head.
The back of my father's head and that damn
mountain road. I don't think I had ever felt
so small, so misplaced, so completely
lost in my entire life. Dead deer really did line that road,
all the way to that new home, should have guessed it was a sign.
Should have known that no place good comes from
a trail of dead deer, and a road that never ended.

That road sign made itself clear to my blurry young eyes,
then that damn deer ran into our 1993 aqua marine Corolla;
me in the backseat, my father's head in the front,
my mother stunned. That damn deer looked up at us with despondency,
my head cocked to the right looking into its eyes.
It looked disheveled, confused, maybe even lost.
I was lost, I didn't know where that damn mountain road
started or stopped. The dear darted up the road. We never saw it again.
My father got out and looked at the damage,
"Just a dent," and we continued down that road.
Another long line of that deer's dead relatives, still coating
that damn mountain road all the way south. Striking that deer
had to be a sign, a sign to go back home,
back to the cold white north.

I'll find that road again one day, I'll drive myself up it,
headed north from the south, nothing but road ahead,
road and mountains, mountains and road kill.
I won't once look back, no. I won't once look back on that road that stole
me from home and took away all that I ever knew.
No, I'm headed north from the south.

Whitney Holbrook

Paint with Ink

Our souls cling together and whisper:
Your breath is hot from dunes that broke the sun.
Your eyes pour like ink wells, pooled and poised before a word.
You paint slowly down my arm into the heart of my hand,
A language that my tongue resists,
One understood completely through the raven feathers falling across your forehead.
We are draped in color, bare and baring ourselves
So close the inches between our breaths are aching.
Your ink ripples and flutters, underbrush lashes,
Torso bleeding black down the planes of our chests.
Skin blossoms in the hollow of my throat
Where your lips plant themselves, bloom, and press me down against the stars.

Sydney Zuerlein

Love to Northern Ireland, From Across the Atlantic

A plane flies across the pale pink sky at gloaming
when the car is empty, save for me and the song
I am singing. I wonder
where it's going. I know
where I'd be going.

Sydney Zuerlein

The Quaint

The quaint is a relic;
the pansies are its kin.
And the ivy trailing up the old
stone walls, reincarnation
of an Irish riverbed,
form the narrow road
that leads up to heaven.

Amanda Martin

I Draw the Line that You Walk

I am writing this with you in mind.
Hands tucked up into my sleeves,

a sliver of hair resting gently behind
my ear, my eyes are low, dripping

with an incessant need to be desired.
Like a beggar I sit waiting, feeding

off your slow stream of emotion. I
am stranded impatiently on this island

of fear. I've been naïve and the fault
is all mine. When you strike

with your mallet of affection
I am unresponsive. You give

more than you take, but it is never
enough to revive me with.

Lauren DeReese

To Georgeanne

A heart, empty as the boxed wine bladders
which litter your house, lays
deep in the cavity behind your breasts.
The sun streams in,
thin slices of light cutting through blinds,
piercing your ethanol slumber.

Another three Martini day.

Your little boy runs in with smiles
from his face to his feet.
With your screaming, from exhaustion,
a relic of nights spent clinging
to porcelain and memories,
his smiles fade into the grayed life that you live.

Kathleen Wile

Reality

His head shined brighter than a newly polished pair of shoes.
"They want us to advocate more," he said.
"We can change lives and change the world," he said.
I sat half-watching, too focused on the chill bumps that
Surfaced from the plate tectonics under my skin.
I used to believe that too, you know,
all that pizazz. That Uncle Sam piping,
Mountain moving, tree hugging, heritage first
Sort of talk.
And then I came to college.
I met people.
People who would, but couldn't.
People who could, but didn't care to.
Sitting in class every other day,
Listening to them beat the "problems" into submission
Like a trainer would a sluggish
Horse at the races.
Each lash brutally wounded my ideals,
The bright sheen of my own coat tarnished by welts.
Because within those Gerber walls,
And those air-conditioned rooms,
They were advocating .
For what?
An A for the semester?
A life of leisure following graduation,
when all their youthful protestations
Amounted to hours in a pool float
Or a corner office in the
Thirteenth floor of the tallest building in Charlotte?
I looked up to the sound of applause.

Fiction

Lauren DeReese

The Commencement of the Witch Hunt of 1806

Reverend Musgrove had three petit fours at tea on Sunday afternoon and has not felt the same since. Most swear that Emberly laced the icing with arsenic and fly-wings, but he insisted that it was merely rheumatism and a bad head cold. He dropped dead two hours after these words left his purpling lips.

Mary Miles Davis

Can I Get You A Pillow?

There was something about the way he laid there and farted that was the final straw. I couldn't look at his unshaven, slack face one more minute. His greasy hair, un-brushed teeth and slovenly appearance had become a standard. Where his clothes weren't stained with food, grease, dirt and sweat they were threadbare and holey. I offered to go shopping with him for new clothes; he said he had plenty. I had offered to clean out his closet; he said I better not touch it.

He wasn't helpful around the house either. I had been working non-stop for weeks and keeping the house: cleaning the toilets, dusting, making beds, sweeping the floors, paying the bills, grocery shopping, cooking, washing dishes, and doing laundry, all while he lay on the sofa and "napped". He needed to "rest his eyes", he needed to "let his food settle", he needed to "relax".

I was up at 7am, made coffee and breakfast, sorted laundry, cleaned the kitchen, and started the routine of picking up after him. Picking up after him when he got off the sofa and left the blanket in the floor, when he got out the cereal and left the pantry door open, when he left the cereal box on the counter , when he dumped the uneaten cereal in the sink and left it there to harden, when he pushed his chair back from the table and left it in the middle of the room, when he read in the bathroom and threw the newspaper in the sink.

He had gone back to the sofa for a nap after being up for two whole hours. So when the washing machine buzzer went off, he farted as if it was a queue and that's when I took mine. He had asked me for a pillow earlier and I decided it was time to get it. He was active for several minutes, but he's resting now.

Faith Lippard

Jalapeno

Listening to a story about the birth of a baby usually grosses me out. Either too many bodily liquids are described or the person telling the story has that gooey-eyed expression just asking to be slapped off their face. The birth of Christ is my one exception, because those New Testament guys knew how to do it: short lines and no mention of baby making parts. When I hear that story, I feel blessed and just a little queasy about the whole farm animals in the operating room thing. But, I'm pretty sure those are some natural, sane, human emotional reactions to that story. Getting turned on…probably isn't.

It's not that I'm getting fired up about anything in the text. It's the guy holding the Bible: Calvin Houston. He was the first non-scowling face I met after my family joined Southern Hope Presbyterian Church, a pointy building that looks bite-sized compared to our old church my mom had grown tired of. It was an adjustment being the only half-Hispanic in an all white church. It was also an adjustment coming into a new youth group as a junior in high school. Calvin, my youth leader, was nice. Most Christians are bothered by my platform shoes, bejeweled tops, and creative makeup. He didn't seem to mind my loud, glam rock inspired outfits. He also didn't try to fumble out any Spanish, a language I barely understand. He looked me in the eyes, not at my Creamsicle orange eye shadow, and shyly tried to shake my hand. I gave him a fist bump.

"So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David. Does anyone know how long this would have taken?" Calvin asks us enthusiastically, hand gliding down his chest.

And that's why I can't take what he's saying seriously. He's constantly touching himself. Every other word is another motion of his hand in his short spiffy brown hair or on some part of his toned, tall body. He's a cycling junkie; they wear tight clothes for speed or something. But, I don't think that gives him an excuse to wear t-shirts from Baby's-R-Us. I mean, how am I supposed to pay attention to the book of Luke when Calvin is up there caressing himself like some unholy male model?

I try slouching so I can only see him from the neck up, but the

bristly material of the chair scratches me like an alley cat. I hate the new chairs. They're stiff and very butt-unfriendly. I miss my old maroon one with the broken back I could practically nap in. This one forces your spine in perfect alignment. It reeks of Janette. The whole youth building reeks of her girly, Martha Stewart décor. The cinderblock walls that used to have a cool prison-like feel are now coated in a baby blue paint. The chairs and new puffy sofas are authority-laced navy. The drum set and guitars have been moved to the right side of the front and a black podium has replaced the old-school wooden one. I hate it, especially the chairs.

In desperation, I almost decided to take another try on one of the cuddling couches, where the nice girls whisper and giggle. But, I didn't think extra cushioning was worth stomaching an argument about the Jonas Brothers.

"Honey, how long did it take?" Janette, his wife and current interior decorator, provides. No one has answered him.

Calvin starts off on some amazing thing he learned in seminary, Janette bobbing her plump face up and down for encouragement. He's in "public speaker" mode: bright, bubbly, and sickening.

Being a youth leader means he has to get up and talk in front of crowds. But, apart from the hours between 6 and 7:30 on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, he's anything but passionate and lively. He's quiet, prone to wander from large groups, and has a habit of joggling his legs a lot, shifting his weight, bending them back and forth like a fidgeting flamingo. He's very sweet, very hot, very thirty, and very married.

A mass of teenage bodies whirl around me as the meeting ends, and I'm reminded of how happy I am to be almost done with high school. I have a little more than a semester of crap to go. I stand and am ready to join the herd when I feel short, blunt nails tap my shoulder.

"Hola, Alex! Ready for tonight?" Janette says loudly despite how close we are. "You do remember what we talked about, don't you?"

"Oh, right, jalapeño peppers," I say, as usual, without thinking. She looks constipated, or confused. "Tonight's when we get our roles for the Nativity play."

She told me auditioning would help me get to know more kids in the group, to make other friends, friends beside Calvin. She also said I'd add some diversity to the cast. Her phrase was "cultural zest." I felt like a jalapeño pepper. Not to mention, it doesn't seem to matter much that my father's side of the family has grown up in the States for three

generations. I'm about as Mexican as Taco Bell.

"I'm going to get my list. Why don't you sit up front," she orders sweetly.

I bite my lip and can feel some of my robin's egg blue lipstick smear. Her eyes crinkle against her pudgy cheeks, and she waddles to her oh-so-professional podium. I collect my sequined purse and clear cup of Sprite before moving one row of chairs forward. Farther up, she looks more like a bloated yoga instructor behind the podium with her red hair in a loose ponytail and her now signature sweatpants smothering her thighs. Calvin is on the drummer's stool by Janette's right. He waves to me.

"Okay, you guys, listen up," Janette says. "I just want to start this off by saying that all of you guys did super good jobs, and I hope you get the parts you wanted!"

There's a chorus of squeals from the couch behind me. Three girls lock their arms and cross their fingers. Janette shoots them a grin.

"Where…should I start?" she says with dramatic, stage-like hesitance. Has this stupid play already started? "Well, the part of Joseph goes to Calvin…again."

Calvin smiles meekly and she winks at him.

"The part of Mary goes to me, of course." I guess it's supposed to be obvious because she's fat, I mean pregnant.

Apparently, being pregnant also gives you the nerve to boss people around because about a month ago, Janette told me to stop giving Calvin anymore CDs of my "weird" music. Weird music, according to her, is anything that doesn't involve Jack Johnson acoustic guitar or Jason Mraz lyrics about fedoras. She also decided to break up our one-on-one talks, something Calvin and I ended up doing amid the mindless weekly mingling. I talked, he laughed.

It was during one of these I introduced him to the almighty David Bowie. He used to listen to Billy Idol back in elementary school and asked me if they were similar. I told him, other than the eyeliner, no. And with a blasphemous comparison like that I was practically forced into burning him CDs. I started at Bowie's self-titled debut before it became a weekly activity as I worked through his discography. Calvin started to expect the burned silver discs, and I had to mutter some lame excuse when I stopped. I could have sworn he looked depressed.

"…the three wise men," Janette is able to get out before a masculine hoot erupts and the basketball player guys all high-five.

"The part of Gabriel goes to Harrison," she says, nibbling on

some pretzel sticks. Harrison, the longhaired moody kid, looks extra pensive. "The shepherds' parts go to Billy, Gabe, and Nathan."

Janette has a thing for salty, crunchy foods. She was downing a Styrofoam bowl of Tostitos and salsa when she asked me to stop giving Calvin CDs. I was on my way outside when she stopped me at the door. I was the last one out because I had been talking to Calvin about my stupid math class. He had to lock up the church for the night. So, it was just Jeannette and I on the "Welcome Home" mat by the half-open powered blue door leaking fresh air of freedom.

"Hola, como estas mi amiga?" she said as American as possible.

"Gesundheit," I said, because her words were about as clear as mucus to me.

"Ha, you're so funny!" she said. "But, seriously how are you?"

"Tired."

"Mmm, aren't we all?" She inhaled a few chips. "How do you like youth group so far? I know you've been here for about half a year, but I don't think I've ever asked you."

"It's pretty good. I'm learning," I said honestly.

"Do you like the people here?"

"Sure," I said. By this time I was regretting my decision to even try to use the door. I should have just bashed my way out through a random wall.

"Have any favorites, BFFs, compadres?" She licked a bit of salsa from her finger, and a lone tomato square stuck itself to the crease of her mouth. "I see you and Calvin are pretty close."

"Um, yeah, he's a pretty cool guy, leader guy."

"He's pretty hot too, right?" She seemed to be completely serious.

"I…"

"It's okay to say it. I mean, I know you have eyeballs," she said like a corny sitcom mom, wagging her head. Then her voice lowered. "You should see him naked."

"How…." I wanted to make a joke, play this huge awkward moment off, but I couldn't. "How inappropriate."

"Oh, come on, you go to public school," she said, nudging me. And like a freakin' psycho, she blurted, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't give Calvin any more of those wacko CDs of yours. They disturb me."

Then God revealed his heavenly light. Okay, so some headlights shone in the room. But, when I heard my dad call out for me, it was pretty damn majestic.

Normally, if Janette said what she said, I would have either completely ignored her or spit on her stretched out cable knit sweater. But, I didn't want to torch, mangle, or dismantle any bridges that led to Calvin. He's pretty much the only one here worth talking to. He's my friend.

The heating system rattles, and the guy next to me jerks his head up as if he wasn't dosing off. I yawn.

"Animal surveillance for the manger scene goes to…I'm sorry, what's your name again?" The guy with the buzz cut who never washes his hands chuckles. Jeannette smiles, then moves on. "The part of the inn keeper goes to Alex."

Some carbonation flares in my nose, but I manage to swallow without chocking. Calvin is looking at me. Did he just flinch? Or did one of those pretzel bits in Janette's teeth fling into his eyeball?

"The inn keeper?" I ask, trying to keep a neutral tone.

"Yes, the man who tells Mary and Joseph there isn't any room for them," she says distractingly, focusing on her watch. "Try not to wear so much makeup."

A few things stand out to me: man, no makeup, rejecting the mother of Jesus, oh, and the fact that this is the crappiest role since Full House was canceled. I have to be the jackass who denies fetus Jesus a room? Is the devil already taken?

Despite the steam pouring out of my ears, I'm able to hear Janette end the meeting. She gathers her handy zip-lock bags of assorted snacks and dangles the keys in front of Calvin. Smiling, she hands me a script and shuffles away. I reach for my bag just as the stupid chair claws me again. I clench in a cuss word.

"Alex," Calvin says. His hand casually skims my arm. One of his legs bends slightly. "How did your Pre-Cal test go last Friday?"

"Pretty bad," I answer with an exaggerated cringe. "They may kick me out of the class."

"Hmm. Well, I, um, I just wanted to say that the inn keeper may not be the easiest part to work with, but I think you'll do great," he says, doing that cute eye contact thing I hardly ever get.

"I think I'll look good in a beard," I say, and he chuckles like old-times.

"We get to wear matching…," he makes a swirling motion around his head. "Uh, headdresses."

"I don't know if fuchsia is a good color for you."

"Yeah, I prefer maroon," he says with a grin.

"Like the old chairs and carpet."

"Right, the old chairs." He kind of sighs. "I better go. Janette wants to stop by McDonald's. But, e-mail me later, we can throw out some ideas, maybe make the inn keeper less of a jerk."

"Definitely." I glance at the script in my hand, and the stupid eggshell color seems to glare back. I'm so sick of being polite around here. If Janette can talk about her husband being naked, I can sure as hell give my friend a CD, because he is my friend. His hotness is like a bonus song on your favorite album: definitely appreciated, but not necessary. "I almost forgot; I have something for you."

I dig through a mass of lipstick tubes, unfinished college applications, bracelets, and bags of gummy bears to find a hard plastic square. I pull it out triumphantly, checking my messy handwriting before handing it to him.

"Diamond Dogs. David Bowie," he reads the front. "Thanks, I really missed these. I'll put it on in the car."

"Um, it's not really car music," I say. "It's more like headphone music."

"Okay," he says dismissively, and we amble outside.

The church's parking lights are on and they glow only slightly brighter than the autumn heavy trees. There are a couple home-schooled kids loitering around in their lightweight jackets, probably bragging about how they don't have to wake up until noon tomorrow. My dad's Toyota is in the far left of the lot, but I can see my parents talking inside. Calvin and Janette's van is in the space closest to the building, where Janette's pretending to read a magazine from the passenger seat.

"Goodnight, Calvin," I say, giving him an appropriate one-armed side hug.

He lightly squeezes me back. Janette fidgets in the car. For some reason, "hola" pops in my brain. I think of jalapeños.

I sprinkle a bit of cultural zest on his cheek, a small goodbye peck. "Buenos noches."

Calvin's legs shift again. He nods with a spacey expression, seeming to wander in the direction of his war. Janette's staring at me with her mouth open like a big fleshy blowfish, but at this point, I don't care. I mean, what is she going to do, recast me as the star of Bethlehem? No lines, bright lights, and a harness. Maybe I could wear body glitter.

"Buenos noches, Janette!"

Faith Lippard

While the Music Plays

"She's not coming home, Carney. I know this is hard for you, but it's the truth." Lee says this with finality, pressing his long fingers into the dough. His lean, anxious body is like an extension of the raw material. The pale kitchen lights speckle in his blond hair. The 50s doo-wop music from the jukebox seems thunderous. "Yes, I know Stephanie was here just this morning, drinking peppermint tea on the third stool by the front counter. But, things happen like this all the time. I mean, she was supposed to be home hours ago. It's three in the morning. And that stool needs to be cleaned," Lee says, pointing from his pie in progress to the spotless seat. He sighs. "Are you paying attention?"

Carney's seven-month-old mouth hangs open as his eyes follow his father's hand motions. His chubby feet are touching and he slumps on top of the counter in a seated position. The pressed white baby outfit he's wearing is slightly damp down the front. He's drooling.

"You weren't listening, were you?"

Lee moves his hand to the left and sees a set of peepers shift. He switches directions, to be tracked again. That's what he thought.

"You really need to learn to use your pacifier," he says. But, his scold is halfhearted, and he reaches out to his son, making sure to keep his wedding ring finger free from the slobber soon to come. Carney latches on to Lee's flour-covered thumb, gumming and sucking it like a small animal, a bald, pale animal.

This has gone on for weeks. It started on one of Carney's usual late afternoon "visits" as the elderly women passed him around the pie shop to coo and tickle him. Everyone had their turn; it was like a round robin, only not really round since the place is a rectangle. Carney hardly ever cried and Lee saw no harm in sharing his son with his fairly nice D.C. metropolitan customers. However, the poufy-haired lady with the orange-tinted dentures did seem to care when Carney snacked on one of her fingers. A free slice of prune pie fixed that, but not the habit.

It doesn't surprise Lee much. He reasons Carney's obsession with other people's fingers in mouths comes from his mother, Stephanie; she's a dental hygienist. She's also an exotic dancer, but he considers this irrelevant.

Carney pulls back with a sloppy spit noise. He hits the white counter as if encouraging Lee to continue his baking.

"Thank you…," Lee says, taking inventory of his soggy thumb. *Still there.*

He lathers his hands in the utility-sized sink by Carney's side, making sure to scratch away any germs from his skin. Above the sink, a triangular opening looks out onto his pie shop. The place is still. Only a few of the fluorescent squares on the ceiling are on, making the place contrast like an old man's tacky suit against the young nightlife of Dupont Circle. The walls are a faint blueberry color. The plastic lined booths and chairs look lemon fresh. And the swinging double doors are pathetically neutral, reminding Lee of a wilted boutonniere slouched against a lapel. The jukebox by the left wall spills the sound of "The Drifters" whining over a lost love.

The only things present on the front counter are silver napkin holders, brown laminated menus, and a nostril sting of Lysol. The surrounding five round tables are spotted with the same, along with a handwritten list of songs available on the jukebox for 75 cents each. It was a present from his father, a big glowing reminder of the day his mother grabbed the tip jar, tore off her apron, and left twenty-six years ago. He was five at the time, content as a bus-boy in training for Walt's Fruit Pies, the family-owned pie shop. For some reason, Lee was most affected by the loss of sound, even within the crowded bustle of customers. His mother would hum as she waited on tables in her clack-clack-clack heels and ching-ching-ching collectable charm bracelets. Lee had complained of his ears feeling funny, and his father set a plump hand on his head, seemingly able to understand him. The jukebox arrived the next day, a pleasant paternal intention souring like a rotten apple.

A slap against linoleum snaps Lee's neck back into the kitchen. Carney smiles.

"Are you hungry?" Lee asks.

He offers his son a bottle, which he gently declines with a soft poke of his finger. Lee has taken notice of how his son's reactions seem more mature for his age. Most infants would swat the thing away and scream. Most infants would crawl off the counter or into the sink instead of contentedly observing. Most infants would probably be cranky at such a late hour. But Carney is about as strange as his name. His name was Stephanie's idea. He can still remember the coconut scent of the shampoo she was wearing.

He had lifted his face closer to her damp scalp. His breathing was leveling out, skin cooling off. "What?" Lee asked. His right

hand was rubbing circles on her swollen belly. He adjusted her pillow, just in case her neck was straining. She was wearing a new necklace. "What hurts?"

"Nothing," Stephanie said, shifting in their bed to face him. "Carney!"

Their tiny square bedroom seemed to almost sway against the strong wind blowing from outside. The blinds were sealed as tightly as possible, but streetlights still managed to smuggle in like fruit-scavenging raccoons. The window at the head of their bed shook, and he tried to convince himself she didn't just call him another man's name.

"For the baby," Stephanie said. She was able to read him as easily as his menu. "We should call the baby Carney. Carney is--"

"I like it," he said, not needing to hear more.

She smiled, her thin overnight retainer reflecting city light. He kissed her pointy shoulder. *She's so beautiful.*

Flour sifts between his fingers as he returns to his waiting dough. His hands move, mold, and shape the substance. He's reminded of late night massages. Stefanie hunched over a chair after a stressful day of cleaning teeth and pole dancing; his digits loosening the knots in her back. Skin's just a harder form of dough. Except skin can always leave.

"Carney, do you think I'm worrying over nothing?"

Carney observes Lee with a calming expression, and half of his fist in his mouth.

"Stephanie…Mother, Mommy, Mom…," he said, trying to recall what he called his own mother. He can't remember. "Stephanie usually gets home from…her dancing job at one in the morning, and it is now three in the morning. She said she was supposed to get back early since it's her first day back since you were born. Her cell phone is going straight to voicemail. Did I mention she's never been this late before?"

Lee stuffs the now formed crust into the tin pan. He considers if his nonchalance about her keeping her second job was a good decision. She's not naked or even topless. She only dances in revealing clothing. The club doesn't even allow lap dances. He knows this from experience.

After dating for a month, he willed up the nerve to visit her at work. She had insisted he go, just to reassure him she wasn't some girl named Demi Moore or anything. He didn't get the reference.

On a Tuesday evening he passed through security sheepishly, like a lost young boy. From the wall-to-wall mirrors he could see his blond hair was oddly mutated underneath the black lights. Then again,

his pale skin was too. He wasn't one to enjoy a crisp spring walk, but preferred the pie shop and occasionally the bowling alley. This was not a bowling alley.

Crappy music boomed from speakers he couldn't see, as women danced along. There was a bar and some pool tables to his right. Several round stages were scattered around the room, all of them sporting black theater-like floors and chrome polls. He cautiously walked past sweaty clumps of men, all sprawled against the plush furniture around the different stages. Lee tried not to step in any parts of the burgundy carpet that looked wet. He made it safely to an empty platform and gingerly sat in one of the deep chairs. *I could really use a cootie shot, or maybe one for STDs.*

"Can I get you anything, sugar?" a tall dark-haired woman asked, holding a small pad of paper.

"N…n…no thank you," he said with a quivering smile.

"Baby, are you from California?" the waitress leaned over and ran her fingers through his platinum hair, her painted false nails giving him the creeps.

"I'm a local," he said. He mentally sighed when she moved her hand to her bare waist, right below a neon purple strip across her chest. There were also matching shorts and boots, but he only looked once.

"Why is a stud like you looking so nervous? Let me get you a drink, on me," she said, winking.

"I'm fine. But, do you know when Ste…I mean Caries comes on?"

"You mean that white girl right there?"

Stephanie aka Caries, which apparently was another word for cavities, was hanging upside down from the pole just a few feet away from him. She was wearing a bright green bikini, white go-go boots, and a white ribbon around her neck. She slid down at some crazy angle. Just like a cat, she landed on her feet.

"Is that Cherry's necklace?" the waitress said, sounding irritated.

"No," Stephanie said. "If it was, would I do this?" She started an impromptu chicken dance to a loud rap song.

The waitress clicked her gum, and Lee assumed she walked away. He wasn't too sure, because his eyes were up front. She laughed, knowing he knew her secret, as she flapped her arms. *She looks so happy.*

He's violently slicing peaches, yet he's still conscious to cut away from himself. He doesn't want to bleed everywhere, maybe throw something at that stupid jukebox, but not bleed to death. One

of his father's favorite songs is playing and he can see his round face singing along in a high voice that he liked to surprise his customers with. He was an obese man, as are Lee's surviving aunts and uncles. His father's diet consisted almost solely of baked goods and he died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. That's when Lee happily threw away his boring community college textbooks and became the proprietor of Walt's Fruit Pies. He doesn't eat the pies.

"Carney, do you think I should call her again?" he asked, biting into a peach. He does eat the fruit.

Carney makes a gurgling speech, very straight-faced. Lee nods.

"I didn't think so either; don't want to seem too desperate," he says with a nervous chuckle. He focuses on his pie.

With the filling and peaches in place, he begins layering the top slices of dough in a lattice pattern. He's done this so many times, he doesn't even need to keep his eyes on his work. So, they wander to a certain stool across the counter.

The sun always managed to hit that spot at seven o' clock. And that particular August evening as it seemed to settle like butter amid the commuters and surrounding red brick buildings, Stephanie was there. He didn't notice her until she was leaning against the counter from the third stool to his right, what then became her regular seat. Her legs were crossed in dark denim, one of them bouncing a spiked strawberry heel. She ordered a slice of peach and a glass of orange juice. She only glanced at him, her brown hair sliding from her pointy shoulders. Its cleanliness begged to be touched. He settled for a tip.

That could have been the end of it. He was just about to close up. But, as Stephanie stood to leave, a fork tinged against the tiled floor. Lee noticed a lump in the front pockets of her thin hoodie, something he had yet to notice from averting his urge to stare at her fleshy melon-like chest. He could then see the clear outline of flatware. *How adorable*.

"I'll put it back," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Keep it," he said, offering her a timid smile.

"Really?"

"I have a lot," he said, jerking his thumb back to the kitchen. He hesitated. A shrill little number jangled from the music box, robbing him of a dramatic pause. "I--

"I'm a kleptomaniac," she said with a bluntness that shot tingles down his leg. "But, I prefer sharing intolerant."

"I hate carrots," he said, throwing out a random flaw. She chuckled.

"I clean people's teeth for a living…and I dance in a bikini."

"At the same time?"

"Well, I've never been asked to yet," she said.

He could practically feel her hands around his lungs as if to stuff them in her pockets. He wouldn't have said anything.

Lee slams the oven door, spinning the temperature dial with a quick jerk. He removes his apron and walks back to the counter. Carney has a tiny finger scratching at his ear. It only reminds Lee of his own ears picking up the building annoyance of the jukebox. And like the last punch from a playground bully in his third grade class, the song changes.

It's sickeningly familiar. His mother used to hum it as she washed dishes and combed her hair. Her humming tunes of choice were all pre-1960s, and "Mr. Sandman" was her favorite. He hates the song. And Lee's in no mood to hear about dreams or lonesome nights.

With little thought, he walks around the counter and marches up to the machine as if it were the little menace by the monkey bars of his elementary school. He stares. He loosens his neck up, bending it from side to side. He cracks his knuckles. He takes the rolling pin from the pocket of his apron.

"I am turning off your magic beam," he says. It sounds corny even to himself. He's too angry to care.

He lifts the rolling pin and awkwardly aims it the way he'd learned in tee-ball. His elbow juts out with both hands firmly around the wood. When he swings the first time, his eyes are closed, just like tee-ball, and he misses. He tries again, but his eyes tense shut as if on instinct. It starts feeling slippery in his hands, and he realizes he's sweating even though the A/C is at a perfectly mild setting. Lee drops the rolling pin on the checkered tiles. He bends over and yanks the cord out of the wall.

Silence.

Silence rushes through his head, into the pores of his skin, and he feels like all of his other senses have doubled in sensitivity. He swears he can smell the summer air. He hears Carney's dribbles of laughter…and someone making baby noises.

He turns around so fast he almost trips over his clunky shoes. Stephanie has Carney in her arms as she playfully grabs his side. She clings to him almost as tightly as her jeans to her thighs.

"Stephanie?"

"Hey!" she says, still in baby mode. "Hey," she repeats, pecking him on the lips. She does the same to Carney's soft hairless head.

"How was your day?" he said, wishing her motherly affections didn't distract him from being mad at her. He takes the patent leather

purse from her shoulder. He grumbles at himself. "Actually, why are you so late?"

He manages to keep his tone only slightly angry, but she looks hurt…maybe guilty?

"Look in the bag," she says.

Opening it, he sees nothing more than her wallet, makeup, checkbook, and other odds and ends. He gropes around the lining as if to check for secret pockets. There are none. None, and there aren't any pieces of jewelry, shot glasses, or beer mugs.

"Two of the girls ratted me out about taking some of their stuff, and my boss decided to flip out and call the cops. I mean, you know I never steal anything that valuable. It was cheap nickel earrings and stuff. Well, the cops took forever to get there and…." She stops, jarred a little when Carney's head rolls against her chin. "Can we put him to bed first?"

Lee nods and opens his arms to take him up the stairs.

"Thanks, but I got him," she whispers.

They walk slowly into the kitchen, using the door near the back to walk up the narrow staircase. She's in front; he's looking at her backside. He admires her for working off the baby weight so quickly, not that there was much anyway. He'd heard other women in the shop grumble she had what looked like a football smuggled under her shirt. None of her other body parts were noticeably bigger. He stole the line and used it as a joke at dinner. She liked it.

"Where was I again?" Stephanie says, tiptoeing from Carney's bedroom.

Lee sits on the edge of their bed. "The police officers were taking a while."

"Right," she says. "So, they were taking their sweet-ass time. And I had already given Trinity her dumb cubic zirconium ring back. And Mike, the bouncer dating Trinity, is looking at me like I killed his grandmother."

She walks over to the dresser and begins taking her jewelry off.

"Amber almost straight up ripped this necklace off my throat, my necklace that you bought me. Ugh," she said, leaning over to remove her heels. "But, they finally show up and then they talk my ear off for almost an hour."

"Hmm," Lee says, kicking his own shoes and socks off.

"Yeah, and they give this lecture about how stealing is wrong." She laughs, pulling off her top. His eyes follow her movements. "They think I'm in preschool or something?"

"Did they charge you?"

"No, they gave me a warning. Sassy's on the other hand, fired me."

He frowns with what he thinks is a seemingly convincing sign of regret.

"Don't hurt yourself trying to look all sad," she says, stepping out of her blue jeans. "It doesn't matter anyway, I was bored."
In polka dot lingerie and sun baked skin, she plops down on the bed next to him.

"Two and a half years later and you're still staring," she says. "It's cute."

She kisses him and kisses him and kisses him. She stops.

Her face squeezes itself in her usual expression of puzzlement. "Why did you think I was late tonight?"

"I didn't know. I asked, right?"

"Tell me."

"I…I…," he says, hating himself for stuttering. He runs a hand through her clean brown hair. "I wasn't sure, I just thought…maybe, since you're always on time, I don't know…"

"That I wasn't coming back," she says as plainly as if she ordered a slice of blueberry to go. "I'm not--"

"I don't want to talk about it," he says. He never does.

"You never do," she says, scooting closer. She taps his temple. "I know there's some weird stuff in there, but I don't want to leave. I would rather be forced to fill small children's teeth…without Novocain everyday than leave you and Carney. I want to be here."
He noisily exhales, feeling his chest rise into the side of her arm. Her thumb caresses his opened palm.

"Are you sure you don't want…don't want to talk about it?"
He considers if telling her would fix anything, he remembers the joy of pulling that evil cord out. I can do this. His mouth opens as to say something.

She plays with the hair near his neck. "I just want you to know that if I'm ever late again, getting, I don't know, a slushy at 7-Eleven, you won't think I'm gone. You know?"

He slouches in embarrassment. "I turned off the jukebox."
She's uncharacteristically quiet for a minute. "That thing was driving me crazy." She presses into him, the cotton of her bra feeling warm through his t-shirt. "Want me to do the chicken dance?"
He kisses her shoulder.

"I left the pie in the oven."

He can smell burning fruit. His only burnt pie since his first when he was five. It smells oddly appetizing.

Travis Mullis

Once There Was A Boy

Los Angeles, the city of angels, America's golden anus, that speck of life surrounded by the hot boiling plate of South California desert, that metropolis built on 35mm film, the culmination of money, poetry, Broadway, and ethnic ghetto, millions of dreams rising and converging only to collapse under their own weight and energy, Los Angeles, like a mother with claws, like a movie-set wheeled out for the American audience, you won't let me go. I search my memory for why I entered your folds and I can find no suitable answer. You have chewed me, worn me down, ground me into a fine powder. Your streets, your alleys, your empty lots, your suburbs, your diners, your cafeterias, they have all left me crooked, delusional, wasted. I can think of no redeeming qualities to brighten the sad pages of your sorted history. I hugged your offered bosom for months and still I cannot wait to leave the wretched womb of your city limits.

You bloodied whore, you blight, you laughing drunk, I forsake the shores of your port, the curbs of your dirty streets, the smog-tinged residue of your finite skyline. Every day Apollo's red orb sits in limbo on Atlas's waist, hoping it does not have to brighten your dim figure. Every day the assorted members of your populace have to wake up knowing they cannot escape your neon allure. I came to you with hope. I leave you hopeless. From Pasadena to Hollywoodland, from Beverly Hills to Rodeo Drive, your palm trees sway in sea breeze as your cops and criminals (they are one in the same) do battle, leaving their victims to bleed out in your gutters. This city has destroyed me. For what it is worth, you have given me new life. From your night clubs, burlesques, and bars I have learned everything that can go wrong in the human existence. Your tragedy is your innocence, your naiveté, your unfettered optimism, the fact that each night you build yourself back up only to be knocked back down.

For three months I flopped with F. Scott Fitzgerald, the great American dreamer rotted-out by booze serves as my mentor of sorts. In my wildest fantasy I couldn't have imagined my life would feature this man, my idol. And yet, this isn't what I had imagined. Scott is not the well-preserved man about town I had always pictured; he is not the martini-wielding, jazz-stepping romantic I had painted. We ruminated together over bottles of wine and gin, asking each other what had gone wrong. We have nothing and everything, the best of what is real and what is imagined. He is writ-

ing his new book even though he is dying. He is fighting to say what he has always thought, that life was never what he imagined it would be. He ran through his years hoping for a romance that never came, a Byronic epic that never unfolded. His romance struggles to breathe, and I, I struggle to find the right words, to ask for forgiveness, to say the right things, to thank the right people. Fitzgerald and I, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

I

It was a day like any other. The sun rose quickly and the heat was oppressive. I begrudgingly pulled myself away from my bed, got dressed, combed my hair, examined myself in the mirror, and went out into the streets. It smelled peculiar, like a mix of asphalt and sewage. The city had a tendency to sweat and bake in the summer months. I walked along Harding for a block or two and turned onto Fremont. The sun met me as I turned the corner and made my way to my favorite place, Giadakis Diner. I strolled at a tranquil pace. I was in no hurry. I didn't have anywhere to be. I was unemployed and wasn't looking for work. As I came closer to the diner I noticed it was busy for 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I suppose the offices downtown let their ambitious schmoozers go early. I opened the chrome door and entered the well-worn and bustling interior of the diner.

There are two things you need to know about Giadakis Diner. One, it is run by a bunch swarthy Greeks who think Greece is the cat's pajamas. Two, these swarthy Greeks will stop at nothing to rip you off at every turn. The owner of the fine establishment was named Homer Giadakis. He has two sons, both named Nick, both weighing over 300 pounds. The diner was an odd mix of Homeric antiquity and Jazz Age swank, like Fitzgerald and Achilles were sharing a dorm room. For all of its peculiarities, Giadakis Diner was one hell of a good restaurant. The Nicks were nice to me and even let me lug my old typewriter into the place and write every once in a while. The coffee was cheap and the employees were cheaper. It was a good place for an unemployed writer to be on a day when he had no where else to go.

The diner was packed with business men of all types. Bankers, lawyers, doctors, sales men, ad men, detectives, politicians, crooks, and accountants were all crunched up shoulder to shoulder, screaming their orders in thick, wanna-be tough guy accents. Their faces were tired bags. The whole lot of them looked like they beat their wives, neglected their kids, and prayed their parents would die and leave them a million big ones to spend as they pleased. I made my way to the far end of the long counter next to the rest-

rooms and plopped myself down on a cracked leather stool. Homer waddled over to chat.

"What's the rumpus kid? Can you believe these guys? Coming in here and acting like they own the place," grumbled Homer.

"We'll I suppose the city is taking a break cause of this heat. The pigs will fry out of doors."

"I guess you're right. What will you have kid?"

"A coffee and a Reuben. Hold the sauerkraut."

"You writing today? I don't see your typewriter with you," asked Homer. Homer never asked about my writing.

"What do you care about my writing? You want me to rewrite all those Greek epics?"

"Ha! Rewrite my ass kid. You ain't no Sophocles and you never will be. To hell with you and your writing."

Homer laughed and walked back down the counter to the cash register. I was relatively alone at my end of the counter. No one ever wants to sit next to the bathroom. Diner food tends to leave the eater huddling over a toilet not long after they eat it. I didn't mind though. My apartment smelled like shit most of the time anyways on account of the fish market right next door. All day and night I had to smell that lousy fish market and all of the oriental slang that came rushing into my room through the open window. Lousy apartment, I had to get out of there. Homer brought me my Reuben and coffee. I ate it quickly and opened up the newspaper on the stool next to me. Not much was going on. I didn't want to work, however, work was what I had to do to keep my apartment. I skimmed the help-wanted ads when I saw an ad that tickled my fancy.

MGM STUDIOS
SCREENWRITERS WANTED!
COME WORK FOR THE PICTURES.
ALL APPLICANTS MUST HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED.
INQUIRE AT 600 LANDSMAN AVE.

I was only published in small literary magazines in Georgia and Louisiana. But I was published and that was good enough for me. The pictures; I could write for the pictures. It didn't sound so bad to me. It would be simple enough to crank out a few scripts. The studios weren't looking for literature, just something catchy, something hip. William Faulkner was writing for the pictures, Fitzgerald too. Maybe I could meet them. I ripped out the

ad and slipped it into my pocket for later. I put down the paper and yelled for Homer. He came over and stood in front of me.

"What's the word kid? You want something else to eat? I have some key lime pie."

"No, I was hoping you would let me take a few dollars off your hands."

"What for? You in debt or something?"

"No. I found out the studios are looking for screenwriters. That's right up my alley." Homer looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"I don't think you can bribe studio people. They aren't hurting for money."

"Don't be thick. I need to buy some nice threads for the interview. I can't go in there looking like this. They'll think I'm some sort of degenerate."

"Yeah, but you are a degenerate," he said with a grin.

"I know I'm a degenerate. You know I'm a degenerate, however, the studios don't know that."

"I don't loan money, Sammy. I'm Greek."

"Please, just this once. Come on, I'll wash dishes or something. You know where I live. You can have stiffs come wail on my legs if I'm not good for it."

"Sammy, you know I am making history right now. You sure you're good for it?"

"Trust me. I will get you the money this very day. I can wheel and deal these studio goons any which way I want." I didn't know what the hell I was talking about.

"You got a big head on you kid." He turned it over in his mind a few times, smiled, and said: "Fine. The money is yours. But I have a condition." He grinned.

"Name it. Whatever you say."

"I want my money by the end of the day. If I don't get it; you are gonna wake up with two broken legs. Got me?"

"Homer, do I look like the kind of guy who would rip you off?"

"You look like the kinda kid who would do anything to get a little bit of money is all I'm saying."

"Trust me. I'm gonna give you that money plus interest."

"You gotta lip on you. So be it. Go knock them dead."

Homer handed me a handful of assorted bills and started to walk away.

"Thanks. Homer, you are not gonna regret this. I promise."

I folded the paper, threw down a few coins, hopped off the stool, and ran through the crowd to the door. Out on the street it was boiling. I ducked into an alley and ran all the way to the Sears-Roebuck on Lamont.

The store was huge. I got lost in the apparel section when I found a sales assistant who took me to the suits. I was sweaty, I stank, and I think the sales assistant knew as much based on his looks. I felt bad. I felt like a bum. I tried to lighten the mood and crack a few one-liners. It didn't work. He fitted me real quick and brought out a blue blazer and slacks. I looked kinda goofy in it, but I bought the stuff anyway. I wasn't the type to mess around with clothes. I looked in the mirror and thought something was missing. My head looked like it had been shrunk.

"You got any fedoras?" I asked.

"Yeah, you got the money?" he asked as he looked me up and down. He wasn't too impressed with what he saw.

"What the hell does that mean? I got the money. I look like someone who hasn't got any money?"

"You look like you stepped out of the poorhouse."

"Hah! Poorhouse my foot. Just get me a hat you fat bowl of monkey spunk." I had only been in Los Angeles for three months and I already sounded like a native. However, I don't think the assistant bought the act.

"Does blue suit your fancy?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He walked away grumbling to himself. A few minutes later he came back with an armful of hats which he threw down on the chair next to me.

"Here you go. I brought a wide selection of sizes to pick from. Have a nice day," he said as he lumbered away.

"Is that it? What kind of service is that," I yelled after him.

"The kind of service phony punks like you deserve," he yelled back.

What a swell guy. I tried on the hats. They were all too big except for one that fit just right. I looked good. I looked like Capone. I looked like John Dillinger. John Dillinger. He was the kind of guy I wanted to be. Riding around in fancy cars, robbing banks, shagging girls, that was the life. Maybe I could write about him at this studio gig. I wondered if Faulkner and Fitzgerald worked for this studio. I couldn't remember which one they worked for. Oh well, I would ask at the meeting.

I bought the suit, slacks, and fedora and went outside. I had no idea

where Landsman Avenue was. I hailed a cabby and got in.

"600 Landsman Avenue and step on it."

The cabby turned around and looked at me strange. "Wow! The film studios? What are you doing there?" he asked with a laugh.

"I work for the pictures. Now turn back around and step on it before I step on you wise guy," I responded.

"Alright, no harm meant fella. I just don't get too many Hollywood types."

He drove like a maniac. I don't know why I lied to him. It felt good saying I worked for the studios. I felt important. I felt like Humphrey Bogart. I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

The cabby pulled up in front of MGM Studios. The place was jumping. People were running every which way. I was breaking out in a sweat I was so excited. I threw a bill at the driver and jumped out. He yelled something I couldn't hear and drove off. I had no idea where to go. I stopped a young girl who was running past and asked her where the screenwriters worked. She pointed to a two-story building just inside the gates of the studio. I clicked my heels together and sauntered toward the building.

The writer's quarter looked like a cheap motel in Nevada. Palm trees, stucco, iron rails, and a sense of impending doom hung over the place. The place was a dump to say the least. The studio must have thought that keeping them depressed would keep them writing well. I guess they were right. As I walked through the studio gate I noticed the sign that hung overhead, METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER. This was the real thing, the big money. Here I was 21 years old, a boy from Black Mountain, NC standing in the lot of MGM studios. Life can surprise you like that sometimes.

I made my way over toward a sign that said screenwriting interviews. There was a line of maybe 300 men wrapped around the executive offices of MGM. Most of the 300 were boys younger than me, kids who had grown up on pulp magazines and gangster films like me. Some of them looked like they had never even shaved. I stood at the back of that line for maybe 3 hours. My suit was soaked through with sweat. My stench was pungent. I was getting close to the front of the line. I was nervous. I didn't know what I was going to tell these people. I had only written a handful of stories and only three of them had been published. I'd have to smooth-talk my way through it. When I got to the front of the line I was called into the building by a secretary. I was escorted into an office. The secretary left and shut the door behind her. The office was extravagant. The oak paneling was hung with various paintings and a grand piano and bar stood in the corner calling me. At the far end of

the office away from the piano and bar sat a huge mahogany desk and a red leather armchair. In that chair sat Ira Shapiro, Executive Producer for MGM Studios. Ira had the look of an oil tycoon. His girth was immense and his hair was perfectly parted and oiled. His mustache was waxed and his olive complexion made him shine. He chewed on a big cigar and sipped on a brown liquid that I guessed was scotch. He waved his fat sausage fingers at me, asking me to sit down.

He looked me up and down, sucked his teeth, and said, "Alright schmarter, you got two minutes to convince me. I don't want no guff. I don't want no lip. Let's talk business."

I sat there dumb-founded. I cleared my throat, said a prayer and got to work. "I ain't gonna lie to you. I don't have much experience in writing. I have only been published three times. But what I lack in experience I make up for in spunk. I have creativity in spades. I can guarantee I have watched more movies than anyone else you have or will interview today. I have read just about every pulp-mag ever published. I know the plot, dialogue, and characters inside and out, and let's be honest; you ain't looking for Shakespeare. You want stuff that will catch the eye and make you money. I can write stories like that all day long. I am young and full of energy. I don't drink or whore around, so you can be sure I won't be distracted. I will write however you want me to write. I will make any changes you want me to make. I have been in this city for 3 months Mr. Shapiro. I don't have any friends, any money, any girls, or any hopes. I ain't asking for charity but I don't mind if you take those things into consideration. By the way, you have a beautiful office, the kind of office I want to have some day, the kind of office that only real men, serious men can have. Don't mistake my comments for ass-kissing. I don't owe you anything. I don't ask you to give a damn. All I ask is that you consider what I said. Hollywood is in need of some new energy. I can give you scripts full of energy. That's my offer. Take it or leave it."

Shapiro sat there for several seconds just staring at me before he burst into laughter. "Holy shit kid! Where did you learn to do that? You talk like a Tommy-gun. I like that, and I like you. I ain't never had anyone say that kind of stuff during an interview. You didn't go busto; you were bold. You're all business. I like that. Here, have a cigar. Let's talk turkey."

I couldn't believe it. It had worked. All those pulp mags had finally paid off. I looked at the offered cigar and said, "Sorry, I don't smoke."

Shapiro tilted his head back and chuckled. "You're a joker too. What ain't you kid?"

"No. I ain't joking. I don't smoke. I don't like the taste."

"What? You serious? You a Quaker? You smoked and didn't like it? I ain't never met a guy who didn't like to smoke. Take the cigar kid."

I hesitated. I didn't want look like a coward.

"If you're smart you'll take the cigar."

"Well, if you put it that way." I reached forward and grabbed the cigar, lighted it with Shapiro's offered lighter, sat back, and exhaled.

"That's better. You gotta name?"

"Oh yeah. My name is Sammy Carraway. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"You know me. I'm Ira Shapiro. I run this show as it were. What are doing out here, selling hotdogs downtown?" He laughed and all the fat in his face and arms jiggled.

"No. There wasn't much for me back in Black Mountain. I got kicked out of Louisiana State. So, I thought I would light out for the territories."

"Hm. Well, I can't say I care much. I'm a busy man. I have things to do. Let's iron out the details, shall we?" He stood up and strolled around the office with his hands clasped behind his back. "Kid, I need a script a week. Can you do that?"

"I could do a script a day if the money was right."

"I can pay you $100 a week. How does that sound?"

"No. I want $200 or I am walking."

"Don't give me the high hat. I pay Fitzgerald $250. He wrote The Great Gatsby. What did you write?"

"Oh yeah, well how many scripts has he done for you in the last year? I'm guessing he's done about 3. I could do 300."

"So what? He's freelance. He goes at his own rate."

"Well, I'll be your man under contract."

"Sammy, I can't make that deal. You gotta sell it to me better than that. Remember, I got dozens of others that will write for me."

I was coming up empty. I wanted to push as hard as I could. I wasn't backing down. I could tell he wanted me bad. I looked around the room, licked my lips, and replied, "Okay, I'll play. I can have a finished script on your desk by tomorrow morning."

"Bullshit. Nobody can do that. It would be a bunch of garbage anyway. I don't think you could do it."

"Okay, what if I prove I can? Can I get the $200 right now if I deliver a bang-up script by 8 o'clock tomorrow morning?"

"It can't be done. It would be trash. Besides, how would I know you wouldn't skip town with the money?"

"You could send someone to keep an eye on me."

"Who, a nanny?"

"No. I'm sure you know some thugs who could babysit me."

Shapiro went behind his desk and looked out the window. After a while he turned around. "I can do better than thugs. I'll put my secretary on you. I won't have to pay her."

"That's fine by me." I was on fire. How the hell was I pulling this off? That $200 would be enough to pay off Homer and my landlady with some to spare.

"Sammy, if I find out you are screwing the pooch on this; I know a lot of disgruntled Italians who will come down hard on you. You won't be able to run far enough. They will hunt you day and night. You got my drift?" Shapiro smiled. His face could have curdled milk.

"I'm hip to your story. You're making a wise choice. This time tomorrow you are gonna be sitting on dynamite. Mr. Shapiro," I put out my hand, "I am gonna make you a wealthy man."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever you say. You can do as you please, just as long as you're not a schmarter. The three things I hate most in life are schmarters, schmucks, and tax-collectors."

"Well, I'm none of those things. You have yourself a thorough-bred in me, Mr. Shapiro…Now, where is the cash?"

"You're all business. I like that." He went through his wallet and picked out a few bills. "Here's the money. Now, get to work. Marguerite will take care of everything for you."

"Who?"

"My secretary."

"Oh. Well, this is goodbye. I can't thank you enough, Mr. Shapiro… Oh, I almost forgot. Can I meet F. Scott Fitzgerald by any chance? I know he works for you guys. He's what got me into writing in the first place."

"Yeah, I can get you a meeting with Fitzgerald. I gotta warn you though; he ain't exactly what you may think. He's a drunk. He can barely write these days."

"Still, he's my idol. I just want to make up my own mind about him."

"Whatever suits your fancy. I'll get you a meeting with him sometime soon."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"Just bring me a winner."

"Will do." I held the cigar between my teeth and walked out of the office. The secretary was waiting for me. She was someone I knew.

"What are you doing here?" Marguerite was not happy to see me. We had gone on a few dates a couple months back and I had stood her up. She hung around the Giadakis Diner some; after a couple of weeks of idle worship I finally plucked up enough courage to ask her out. She blushed, looked down into her coffee, and said yes. She was a beautiful girl. She was the last living flapper, a throwback to the days before the big crash, before America lost her hope. She had thick, straight, black hair. Her skin was dark brown, and her eyes, her green eyes were the crowning jewels of this perfect piece of art. Green eyes on a Mexican were hard to come by, especially one so indigenous. I don't know why I broke it off. She hung out with gangsters mostly, apes with .35's and sawed-off shotguns. I was the son of poor share-croppers from North Carolina. I didn't drink or smoke. These people weren't exactly good for me. She called me a lot of different things, mostly a wimp. She stopped coming to the diner. I thought I was done with her and here she was all 130 pounds of her standing straight in front of me.

I put my head down and said to the floor, "Hey. Good to see you."

"Drop dead you no-good flake."

"Shapiro wants to see you."

"Fine. I'll be right back."

I waited in the lobby for a few minutes. Marguerite's screams of protest made their way in under the door. She called Shapiro a son-of-a-bitch, a whore. I spit out the cigar and threw it in the trash can. It tasted like decomposing dog-shit. Marguerite came back into the lobby with a look of terror on her face. She sat down at her desk. She was fuming, foaming at the mouth.

"Sammy Carraway, you are a no-good knuckle-dragger. You set this all up, didn't you? Was this some wise idea to get me back in your rather small, rather shitty bed?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I didn't know you worked here. If I did I wouldn't have come. You still hanging out with Enrique or did he slap you one too many times?"

"I see him some. We flop together at the Ambassador. Speaking of flopping, you still in that rat-hole of yours?"

"Cut the attitude sister. Me and you have to hang for the next few hours. So, lets make the best of it. Now times a wasting. Let's go to my place."

"Of all the guys to walk into that office it had to be you. So be it. You don't touch me, you don't talk to me, you don't look at me, got it?"

"Fine. Let's go."

We made our way out of the studio and caught a cab. Marguerite didn't say one word the entire cab ride. She sat with her arms crossed, a scowl on her face, and hate in her eyes. Every few minutes she would look sideways at me and turn her head forward when I looked back at her. The cabby had a look of terror in his face, like he was driving around with dynamite in his backseat. The whole ride back I took in the city and all of its sights, smells, sounds, and people. Every type of person imaginable walks the streets of Los Angeles. The homeless and the movie star rub elbows on a street corner, the prostitute and the politician chat outside a movie theater. All those people, all those different stories waiting to be told: how many of them would live and die in this city? How many of them would drop dead today? I looked out the cab window for so long I forgot where I was. Marguerite yelled at me to get out of the car. She said we had arrived. I snapped to and opened the door. It was strange, like I wasn't the one she was talking to. The cab pulled away and we just stood there looking up at my apartment building.

"You dead or something?" asked Marguerite.

I didn't answer. I just stood there staring off into space.

"What the hell, Sammy? Hello? Are you alive? Mother Mary, why did I agree to this?"

I turned and sneered at her.

"That's it. To hell with you. To hell with Shapiro. I ain't gonna be jerked around like somebody's plaything. Goodbye, Sammy."

"Come on. Let's go get my stuff and go to the diner."

"Drop dead."

"What do you want me to say?"

"You could say I'm sorry."

"Fine, I'm sorry. I was out of it. Can you forgive me?"

"Maybe. Go get your stuff. I'll wait here for you."

I went upstairs and grabbed my typewriter, a few books, a pen, and some paper. I came back down the stairs, slid my rent under Ms. Le's door, and walked out to meet Marguerite. She was standing up against the wall smoking, whispering something to herself. She really did look just as beautiful as I had remembered her. She looked like the original flapper, like Zelda Fitzgerald. She smoked from a whalebone cigarette holder. She was all class. I could see why Shapiro hired her.

She glanced my way and asked, "You ready hot shot?"

"I am if you are. Where'd you get that dress anyway? It looks perfect on you."

"What do you care where I got it from? Don't act like we're friends, we're not."

"If that's how you're gonna act, fine. Don't expect anything from me."

We started to walk down Harding toward the diner. The sun was a small point of light going down behind the hills in front of us. Marguerite smoked and looked around as she walked.

We were almost at the diner when Marguerite stopped and looked behind her.

"You see anybody?" she asked.

"No. Why? Enrique coming to look for you?"

"I've had some guy been following me for the past few days. I don't know who he is. He's always there though."

"You see him now?"

"No. I think we're in the clear."

"After you, Ms. Marquez."

I opened the door to the diner and Marguerite went inside. I followed her in. Homer wasn't there, just the Nicks chatting behind the counter. No one else was in the diner. The Nicks got us a place at the counter and we sat down.

For the next 12 hours I sat there banging at the keys. Marguerite sat next to me with her head down on the counter. She looked bored. She was bored. I could understand her plight. I sure as hell wouldn't want to babysit a screenwriter for half a day. The script came along with ease. The story was a variation of Hammett's The Maltese Falcon. I had thrown in a rape and a couple of crooked cops to give the story a little more edge. It wasn't anything special but that didn't make a bit of difference. Marguerite slept, smoked, paced, and cursed under her breath the entire time. The Nicks fell asleep in a booth at about 4am. I finished around 7am. I put a rubber band around the script, woke up Marguerite, woke up the Nicks, gave them the money I owed Homer, grabbed my things, and walked out into the morning. Marguerite was barely awake next to me as we walked back to my apartment. I had done the impossible.

After I had put my things away and freshened up, Marguerite and I got a taxi to the studio. Once we were on our way I looked over at Marguerite who was asleep beside me. I woke her up.

"Hey, I just want to say I'm sorry for everything. I don't know why I stood you up way back when. I don't really know what I'm doing.

She sat there in silence. I continued talking.

"You have a right to be mad. I understand that. I'm just saying it was real swell of you to keep an eye on me after everything I had done to you."

"It wasn't what you did, Sammy, it was what you didn't do. You didn't pay attention to me. You didn't listen to me when I spoke. You never even tried to treat me like more than just a whore."

"I know. I guess I thought I was some kind of tough guy because I had just moved to the city. I've got a lot of problems."

"I forgive you. You're still an asshole though."

I sat there smiling; she lighted a cigarette and offered it to me.

"No thanks. I don't smoke. Don't you remember?"

"You smoked for Shapiro. You won't smoke for me?"

"I guess you're right. I got a new life with new habits."

"That a boy. It's good for you anyway. It takes the edge off."

The rest of the car ride Marguerite looked out the window and smiled just enough to create dimples in her cheeks. We would look sideways at each other like Junior High crushes. I felt triumphant. I would walk into Shapiro's office and be greeted as a hero. Things were looking up.

II

"Well, I'll be damned. You did it kid," barked Shapiro as he held onto my script like it was the picture of his beloved.

"Hot damn, we got ourselves a real winner in this one. You done good kid. This script is a homerun. My hat is off to you, Mr. Carraway. You got the writing chops you promised me."

I smiled. Marguerite guffawed somewhere behind me.

"Now, now, I can't have you being snotty to my golden boy. Marguerite, you gotta be nice to this one. He is our bread winner."

"He's something else too," quipped Marguerite from the back wall of the office.

"Come now, Margie, you can take MGM's new star out to dinner. You know I make for thrilling conversations. We can dance the Charleston and drink gin till the sun comes up. What do you say?"

I was turned around in my chair facing her with a cigar in hand.

"You don't drink, Sammy…I wouldn't be caught in a social setting with you on my arm if my life depended on it. Me and you are busto. Don't try and mend fences that are too far broken."

"How about I build a new fence? I apologized, so let's paint the town purple. And I can start to drink if I need to"

"Yeah, you're gonna need to learn to drink and smoke," interrupted Shapiro, "otherwise everyone is gonna think you're peculiar, stuck-up, Baptist."

"So be it. I'll give drinking a try. I hear it's good."

"By the way, it's paint the town red you dunce."

"Well, we're gonna paint the town purple. Purple is a royal color. We're royalty now, Margie."

"Both of you need to shut it, now. Marguerite, our boy seems to like you, so you are going to entertain him for the next few days while I introduce him to the town, to the glitz.

"I'll do it but I'm not a call girl."

"You're my secretary. You will do as I say. I pay you to do as I say."

"Fine, but I ain't sleeping with him."

"I don't need you to sleep with me, Margie."

"It's Marguerite. We're not on a nickname basis yet."

"Well, we were."

"Enough," yelled Shapiro, "you two are gonna learn to like each other. It won't be for long, just long enough to introduce Sammy to the right crowd."

"Marguerite, I promise to treat you right this time around."

"It's not that easy, Sammy." She thought about it for a few seconds and said, "Okay, I'll play wife. You gotta be nice or I will make your life a living hell."

"You already have. Besides, I still remember how to tango."

Marguerite rolled her eyes and smiled.

"I am glad you two are getting comfortable. If you play your cards right, Sammy, you are gonna be the talk of the town. I'm gonna chew the fat with my directors and get this script turned into a blockbuster, just you wait."

Shapiro picked up the script and started to walk out of the room. He stopped and asked, "By the way, what's the name of this thing?"

I froze. I hadn't thought about a name, so I suggested the first thing that came to mind, "I call it, Murder at Midnight."

Shapiro groaned, "You can't think of anything better, something more creative?"

Marguerite chimed in, "What do you call those detective stories, something boiled?"

I answered, "It's hardboiled."

Marguerite got red in the cheeks, "How about Hardboiled Midnight?"

Shapiro threw his hands in the air, "That's the ticket. Hardboiled Midnight has that extra flair. Good work, Ms. Marquez. I have a feeling you two are going to have an interesting weekend. This is the beginning of a dream come true."

Shapiro was right, it was a dream come true. I spent the next two weeks wining and dining with everybody who was anybody in Hollywood. Shapiro bought me a tuxedo. He bought me a flask, a silver cigarette-holder, and a whole new wardrobe. Marguerite and I moved into a new apartment on North Laurel close to the studios. Marguerite, Shapiro, and I drove around Los Angeles in a limousine with a chauffeur. Red carpets were rolled out for us wherever we went. We would enter the party, walking through a haze of cigar smoke, flash bulbs lighting up our smiling faces. I learned to sip martinis, smoke Lucky Strikes, schmooze the rich, and laugh at just the right time. My smile became a set piece. I was a figurine being carried around to be admired. My script was already being made into a movie. I met Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Charlie Chaplin, and Shirley Temple. Marguerite seemed to enjoy it all; she puckered her lips for every photo, laughed at every producer's joke. She cut her hair short so the flapper look would be complete. Entire rooms stood in awe whenever she entered them. We looked like Zelda and F. Scott before their lives collapsed. I drank, and drank, and drank. Why had I never tried this before? I would glide through the evenings in an alcoholic fog. It all seemed so glamorous. This wasn't like home. I stopped going to Giadakis Diner. Homer would leave notes on my door asking me if I was alive. I didn't have time for the diner anymore. I was working with my team of writers all day, then at night I would make the rounds at all the parties. One night I got so drunk I danced on the tables of the Ambassador Hotel. My life was finally worth living.

Marguerite forgave me. She would check on me when I was writing. It took some time but her protective curtain fell down at last. I paid attention to her this time. Every day I bought her tulips, her favorite flower. We floated in the Hollywood sunset together. She worried about me a lot. When I got drunk; she got angry. She would yell and scream until she was hoarse. I would wake up in the middle of the night and look over and see her smoking and looking out the window. She would tell me, "I didn't leave one fool to take up with a second fool." Enrique had been angry when she told him she was now going with a gringo. He threatened to kill her. She called his bluff and nothing came of it. Six months after I had delivered that first script I had cranked out 25 more screenplays. The money poured in. I learned that the rich stayed rich because they never spent their own money. I didn't spend a

dime at any of the parties I went to. Everything was paid for by some shadowy tycoon or movie star. No one was ever sure who paid for what.

Three months into my new life I got to meet Fitzgerald. Marguerite and I attended a party that Shapiro was throwing for the selected cast of MGM's new film, Gone with the Wind. I bought Marguerite a new fur. We both looked good and we knew it. We entered the party on a wave of jazz that came pouring out of the band stand located at the front of the cocktail longue. The party was well under way by the time we got there. I hadn't had anything to drink and I was feeling thirsty. Margie and I made our way into the crowd. I found Shapiro and asked him where Fitzgerald was. He sighed and pointed to the corner of the lounge. Fitzgerald, my idol, was sitting in the corner, head on the table with a drink in his hand. No one was sitting anywhere near him. I left Margie behind and made my way towards Fitzgerald.

My fascination with Fitzgerald had begun in college. In my sophomore literary studies class I had read his first book, This Side of Paradise. I couldn't believe so young a man had written such a sophisticated novel. His lyricism was stunning, his characters were believable, and his entire story was stringed together with a romantic tragedy I hadn't discovered in any other writer. To put it simply, Fitzgerald was the writer I hoped to be. I began to devour everything Fitzgerald. I read all his books, all his short stories, all his essays. I started to dress like him, speak like his characters. I wanted to find my own Zelda Sayre. I scoured LSU for Southern debutantes. I didn't find any interested in a homely share-cropper's son from North Carolina. I listened to Jazz, and spoke like a tough guy. I would try and become Fitzgerald like I was studying him for a part in a play, like I was going to write a biography about him. This boy from a small town in the Midwest had hit it big and so would I. His fall from grace didn't diminish any of his genius in my eyes. If anything, all the booze, drama, and tragedy made Fitzgerald a more compelling role model. He had cracked-up but not given up, not yet.

When I reached Fitzgerald's table I stood there in my coat and tails until he dragged his head off the table and his eyes met mine. He looked pallid as death. His skin was beaded with sweat, his pupils were enormous, and he hadn't shaved for days. This was not the man who wrote The Great Gatsby. This man was some impostor come to break my heart. The entire area around him stank of alcohol.

"How may I help you good sir?" he blurted through a mouth reeking of gin.

"My name is Samuel Carraway. You're my hero, Mr. Fitzgerald. I was hoping I could sit and talk with you for a while."

"You need to find a new hero," he paused, "You drink gin?"

"I drink anything."

Fitzgerald smirked and waved me down into the booth.

"Mr. Carraway, where was it that you spawned from?"

"I'm from Black Mountain, North Carolina."

"I know that area well. Zelda stays at an asylum near Asheville."

"I know. Actually, I've seen you before. I saw you and Thomas Wolfe walking down Hayworth Avenue in Asheville. I didn't know who you were at the time. My parents are share-croppers. I loved Asheville but I had to get out of there. I got a scholarship to LSU and I was gone."

"That's just swell my boy. Wolfe, he's dead now. Tuberculosis got him."

"I heard a few days ago."

"He was one of the best. His lyricism couldn't be matched."

"I think yours could match it."

"Think again. I'm a has been, a Hollywood hack. I've only got my name in the credits once. All the other gadfly script boys steal my thunder."

"It doesn't matter. They can't write like you can. You're a genius."

"I was a genius. After the Jazz age ended, I ended. My romanticism can't survive during a Great Depression. Zelda's gone, my daughter barely sees me, and I'm having an affair with a gossip columnist. My books are out of print, my writing is out of style, and my name is out of memory. Forget it all. This gin is all I need."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Fitzgerald was broken. His alcoholism was worse than I thought. My hero was groveling in the corner of a cocktail lounge.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, you can't act like this. Come on, you have to have one more good story in you, at least one."

"Forget it. I don't want to write anymore. It wouldn't make a difference. I had a good run while it lasted. I have nothing more to say."

"I know you have much more to say."

"Who the hell are you anyway? Don't tell me what to do you hillbilly. I know who you are. You're the new kid on the block with all the witty one-liners. Well, one-liners don't make a man a genius."

"Maybe you're right. I am just a hack right now, however, one day when I have the money I'm gonna write novels and short stories."

"No you're not, you're gonna get caught up in this town. This town doesn't let her young go. She holds on to them and devours them."

"I am sorry you think that. You're not what I thought you would be. I'll leave you to your broken heart. What they said about you is true."

"People say a lot of things. Leave me alone. Go crawl back into the mountain hollow where you came from."

"Goodbye, Mr. Fitzgerald."

I walked away from the table leaving him in my wake. Marguerite was dancing with Clark Gable when she saw me. She broke off the dance and ran over to me.

"How did it go? What is he like?"

"He wasn't what I thought he would be. He's all washed up."

"He looks pretty bad. What happened?"

"He gave up. Things got tough and he gave up."

"You're upset."

"No."

"Let's go home. This party is boring anyway. This movie seems like it's gonna be a lousy flop to me. Who cares about rich slave owners?"

Marguerite put her arm around me and we stepped onto the street. The whoosh and sashay of traffic was deafening. Marguerite came in close and kissed me on the cheek.

"I love you, Marguerite."

"I love you too, Samuel Carraway."

"Let's go home."

We got in our limousine and made our way home. That night I couldn't sleep. All I could see when I closed my eyes was Fitzgerald face down on the ground, gin pooled next to him.

The next day I woke up and went to the office early. I dismissed my team of writers for the day and sat down at my desk. Fitzgerald had been right. I was the studio's stooge. I needed to really write. I didn't know what to write about. I just started typing, soon I had twenty pages. After a few hours my phone rang and I picked it up. All I could hear was heavy breathing on the other end.

"Hello," I said, "Is anyone there?"

"It's me."

"Mr. Fitzgerald, is that you?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking about what you said last night. You're right; I have more stories in me. Come on over. Me and you can make up for last night."

I hesitated. I wasn't sure it would be worth it, "Okay, I'll come to see you. Where do you live?"

"I live on North Laurel, the first bungalow on the left."

"I live right up the street. I'll be there soon."

I hung up and hoped I wouldn't regret my decision. I took my story and put it away, grabbed my cigarette case and flask, and walked out the door. Shapiro saw me in the hallway and gave me a big thumbs-up.

"How is my golden boy doing? Still cranking out masterpieces I hope."

"I'm doing fine, Mr. Shapiro. Fitzgerald wants to see me. We're gonna hang for a while."

"Watch yourself. I don't want you becoming some wash-up like him. I need you writing not drinking yourself into an early grave."

"I understand, Mr. Shapiro. Trust me; I know what I'm doing."

"Keep up the good work. Make me proud."

I saluted Mr. Shapiro and walked out onto the studio lot. Dust was collecting on the concrete and the wind was whipping it up into little cyclones. The whole studio looked brown, like some derelict western township. I made my way to North Laurel and Mr. Fitzgerald.

North Laurel sits in the heart of Hollywood, just a few blocks from the studios. The street was lined with million-dollar bungalows, high-class apartments, and immaculate palm trees. Fitzgerald lived on the corner in a run-down bungalow with a forward-slopping roof missing tiles. The front yard had been neglected for some time. The grass was severely tinged with brown and yellow. I walked up the front walk to the porch. Fitzgerald was slumped in a rocking chair in the shade, assorted papers scattered around at his sides.

"The prodigal son returns. Let me sincerely apologize for my rude behavior yesterday. When I'm under the influence of gin little else in the world is of a concern to me. I must say last night was a low point in my recent memory. Sheilah Graham, the woman I'm seeing, is having some issues with my drinking."

"Then why would you continue to drink, Mr. Fitzgerald."

"Because I am not in control of my faculties. Up is down, right is left, black is white. My alcohol-induced delirium distorts reality. It is all I can do to make it through the days."

"Fair enough, let's have a few drinks and talk."

"What'll you have, Mr. Carraway?"

"Red wine if you have any."

"It can be arranged."

Fitzgerald stepped indoors and returned with two glasses and two bottles of Pinot Noir. We sat around a table on the front porch and talked about literature.

"All the good ones are dying or dead. Crane, Lawrence, Joyce, Tom Wolfe, Virginia Woolf, Proust, Anderson, me; I wonder what the survivors will do? What happens when all the best finally die?" asked Fitzgerald.

"Nothing will happen, Mr. Fitzgerald. New writers will come along and pick up where you all left off. You still have time. Why don't you write?"

"I do want to write. I have a story in my head. I've begun work on it already. I just fear I am fighting against time to finish it. It's called," he paused and stared of into space, "The Love of the Last Tycoon."

"And which tycoon is it about?"

"Shapiro, the story is about Shapiro. I know him well. He hired me when I needed money the most. I will never forget the good he has done for me. But he is nothing more than a friendly cobra, remember that."

"Why do you say that?"

"He is only interested in money. He'll say he loves you, eat you up like fitlet mignon, then throw you back up. For now he likes you kid. The second you stop producing blockbusters at breakneck speed he will feed you to the wolves. That's the only way he knows how to be, ruthless. His competitors at Warner Bros. and RKO will bankrupt him if he loses good writers. Don't worry about it kid. For now you got the world in your arms."

"It won't always be that way. I have to write stories, novels, whatever can bring in some money."

"I'll put you in touch with my publisher. You can get some work selling to him."

Fitzgerald lifted the wine glass to his mouth and took a big gulp. He started to type, sipping while he hit the keys.

"Do you often drink when you write?"

"I always drink when I write. Write drunk and revise sober. Remember that little motto."

"You really we're my idol, Mr. Fitzgerald. I've read everything you ever published. Thank you for spending time with me."

"Sammy, you're about the only friend I have out here. Men don't like me very much. Women know I'm already married to a lunatic. They all just carry on about how great Hemingway and Steinbeck are. I can't blame them. If only Zelda would get better, if only things could back to the way they were; I could write ten novels; I could reclaim my place at the table."

"Then do it. Write for god's sake. Even if you don't think you have what it takes, write."

"I will try. Call me Scott. My father is Mr. Fitzgerald. I will try to write. I have too many regrets and I don't want to add to them…I should have gone to war like Hemingway. I should have been a hero. All we ever did

was train."

We sat for a while in silence staring off down the street at the passing cars and people. Fitzgerald closed his eyes for a while, opened them and said, "I'll snap out of it. I have to." He took a huge slug of wine and starting scribbling on the pad next to his typewriter. He looked at me and said, "Let's write for a while and then get drunk. Everyday you can come here and we can write together and get drunk. We can do it and have fun until the money runs out. What do you say?"

I sat there staring at him and his sad face. He was halfway in-between a smile and tears. I leaned forward and answered, "Let's show them all the truth. Let's have some fun." He laughed to himself for a long while.

His despair seemed to lift if only a little.

And so for three months we wrote together and drank together. I would arrive at his house for breakfast, sometimes with Marguerite, sometimes alone. We would eat and tell stories. Then at 10 o'clock we would start to write stopping only to drink beer or eat lunch. I was amazed at the amount of alcohol Fitzgerald could consume in one sitting. He would sit and drink 30 beers or a quart of gin. His writing was holding up though. My writing was going well too. I had ten short stories ready for publication. In addition to the stories, I was outlining a novel I had had in the works for a long time. When Marguerite would come over all three of us would sit on the porch and tell jokes and stories. It felt strange to be so close with a man and woman I could never even imagined being with two years earlier. I was content. The $200 a week came in as usual; however, Shapiro would call me threatening termination of my contract. I shrugged off his complaints and kept on writing. To appease his threats I wrote a screenplay about a studio executive turned killer who stormed around Hollywood looking for defenseless writers he could maim and murder. He didn't find my joke funny and handed my script over to another writer who rewrote it the way Shapiro wanted. He left me alone to my own devices for a time. Fitzgerald's spirits were lifting by leaps and bounds. His new book was coming along well. Edmund Wilson, his only other friend, declared that it would be even better than The Great Gatsby.

The days ran away like galloping horses. Our drinking got worst. Marguerite got worried. She would beg and plead for me to not go out with Fitzgerald on his binges. I didn't listen. It broke her heart I think. She was concerned I would turn out just like Fitzgerald. She was afraid she would go crazy just like Zelda. It all came to a head one night when Fitzgerald and I got drunk and crashed his car into a ditch on the Pacific Coast Highway. We

barely walked away with our lives. I slunk home to find her wide awake and waiting.

I came into our bedroom and found her sitting at the window with her whalebone holder, smoke curling up to the ceiling.
"Oh shit. What you doing up, Marguerite? It's late. You should be in bed."
I could barely put my words together.

"I'm waiting on my boyfriend to come and take care of me. Look at you. What happened? You look like you were in a fight. Were you mugged?"

"No. Don't you worry your pretty little head. Fitzgerald just ran his car off the tracks. We had fun. We felt like gangsters."

"Sammy, you have to stop doing this. Shapiro's gonna fire you. Your binges with Fitz are going to kill you. I love you both too much to have wake up to news of your deaths. Come here. Let me fix you up. Does Scott need help?"

"No. Sheilah was taking care of his cuts and stuff. You're so pretty. Let's make love."

"What are you nuts? We can't have sex right now."

"What's the rumpus, Ms. Bumpus?"

"Let's go to the bathroom and clean you up."

"Okie dokie."

I stumbled into the bathroom, threw up, and Marguerite dressed my wounds and fed me pain medicine. She looked especially beautiful that night. She was only wearing fish net stockings, garters, and a lace-lined bra. I rested my head against her stomach and closed my eyes.

"What am I doing, Margie?" I asked into her stomach.

"You're killing yourself, Sammy Carraway. Let's go to bed."

She helped me into bed and we slept in each other's arms.

III

The next morning I woke up with a terrible hangover. My head was throbbing. I turned to find Marguerite was still sleeping. I got out of bed and lumbered into the bathroom looking for medicine. I came back into the bathroom and asked Margie where the medicine was. She was on her side facing the wall opposite of me. She didn't answer. I went around the bed to see if she was sleeping. I almost threw up when I realized what had happened. Her throat had been slit and a massive pool of crimson was stretched down the length of her body. I screamed and fell back against the window. Her skin had turned to the shade of Fitzgerald's skin that first night I met him. She was

dead. Marguerite was dead and I had no idea what had happened. Her eyes were open and staring at me. I gasped and started to weep. What had I done? Had I done this? I didn't think so. Who would do this? Who would kill her? Why hadn't I woken up? I could have saved her life if had not been blacked out by the alcohol. I grabbed her hand and kissed it. I held her hand up to my face. It was devoid of all warmth. I pulled away the sheet and noticed someone had also stabbed her in the stomach several times. I wept for a few minutes before I started pacing around the room. I had to get rid of the body. I would be brought in for murder. That couldn't happen. The Los Angeles Police Department was so corrupt they would probably shot me on site just for fun. Who would kill Marguerite?

And then it hit me like poured concrete. Enrique. Enrique killed Marguerite. He said he would kill her and he did. He had waited it out till she dropped her guard. He probably watched me come in drunk the night before and took his chances. Enrique was so caught up in the Los Angeles underground his qualms about murder had disappeared long ago, at least that's what Marguerite had told me. Marguerite, why did this happen? He had gotten his revenge and he wanted to pin it on me. Did he know who I was? Did he know about my past? I had to get rid of that body. The only person I knew to call I hadn't spoke to or seen in months, Homer. Homer had friends who worked in the rackets, did muscle work for some crime syndicate I'd never heard of. Homer would brag about it like it was him doing all the gangster work. He just might help me, just maybe.

I called the Giadakis Diner. The phone rang for a long time before anyone picked up. Finally, Homer's voice came through on the other end.

"Giadakis Diner, how may I help you?"

"Homer, this is Sammy."

The line was quiet for a few seconds.

"Who? I don't know any Sammy."

"Don't screw around, Homer."

"I use to know this Carraway kid. At least that's what he called himself. He used to be my friend. I don't know what happened. He became a big Hollywood type and forgot about who took care of him while he was a scared-shitless little boy in a new city all alone. He got too big for his breeches."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You have to help me. Marguerite is dead."

"That's funny because a couple of detectives came in a few weeks ago asking about a kid named Sammy Marlowe, said he had killed some boy down in Baton Rogue. Hmm, I guess they must have been looking in

the wrong place. Tell me, were they looking in the wrong place or were they dead on?"

They had found me at last. "You didn't say anything did you? I didn't do shit. It wasn't me. You have to believe me."

My world was spinning out of control. I looked over at Marguerite's body. She looked so peaceful. The violence of her murder made me wince.

"I didn't tell them anything. Although I think I should have told them where you are seeing as you killed Marguerite too. You should be more careful, Mr. Marlowe. The cops had a picture of you at some Hollywood party. They're looking for you. In a way I'm sorry, but I hope they find you."

"No, it wasn't me. Let me explain. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. You have to believe me."

"You used me for company, you lied to me, and now you killed the girl you said you loved and some boy in Louisiana. Goodbye. I hope they hang you. I can't believe I let you use me like that. I thought you were a good kid. I'm sorry but this friendship is over."

"I had to lie to you. I couldn't tell you who I really was I-," but Homer had already hung up.

How could I be so stupid and let people photograph me? I had gotten lazy. I thought I was King Kong, the real shit. I had to hide the body and fast. I wrapped up Marguerite in the sheets and carried her into the bathroom. I laid her down in the bathtub and covered her body in perfume.

"I'm so sorry, Marguerite. You died not even knowing who I was. I did love you, I did. Oh, god."

I sat next to the bathtub and sipped on my flask. I had betrayed her trust to the grave. Her body looked pathetic in that bathtub. I got up and pulled the curtain around the tub. I walked toward the bathroom door and stopped in the doorway. I turned around and looked at the bathtub where Marguerite's body rest. I went back to the tub, pulled back the curtain, and undid the sheets. I cut off a piece of her hair and put it in one of my notebooks. After the body was taken care of I shut the bathroom door, flipped the mattress, and put new sheets on the bed. I packed my suitcase with as much as I could. I walked out of the apartment, locked the door, and ran down the stairs. I had only one place I could go, Fitzgerald's bungalow.

I looked like three-day-old steak when I got to his house. He greeted me at the door and welcomed me in. Him and Sheilah were just having breakfast. I asked if I could speak to Fitzgerald alone and Sheilah went out into the backyard. I sat Fitzgerald down and started to sob.

"What happened, Sammy?"

"Did you hear the news?"

I stopped sobbing, "What news?"

"Shapiro called here looking for you. He was pissed. He told me to tell you that you were fired. He had had enough of your drunken charades. He said your contract had been ripped up and thrown in the garbage." Everything was gone. I needed that money. I was bankrupt now. The world had turned against me.

"Well, I have more bad news. Marguerite is dead. Someone slit her throat while we were sleeping last night. I was too drunk to do anything about it. I'm screwed Scott. I'm done for."

Fitzgerald was breathless. He stared at his empty glass and asked, "Are you sure she's dead. How could someone do that? Who would do that?"

"It was Enrique. It had to be him. When she broke up with him he told her he would kill her. I guess he just took his time in doing it. Her blood was everywhere. He had killed in the past. He had no qualms about murder."

"Jesus. Oh my god. How…Oh my, well, you have to call the police. They have to know. You can get a lawyer. I can help pay for it. We can clear your name if you're sure it was him. We can fix this. You're not busto yet."

"It isn't that simple. You don't know the whole story."

I stood up and walked to the window. I didn't even know how to tell the truth I had been lying so long.

"I haven't told you who I really am."

"What are you talking about? You're Samuel Carraway, the kid who is gonna be the next literary star. You're my best friend. You've restarted my writing career."

"My name isn't Sammy Carraway."

"What are talking about?"

"Mr. Fitzgerald, I am going to tell you something and you have to promise not to tell anyone, not even Sheilah. What I am going to tell you is what I should have told you all along."

"Your secret is safe with me. What is this all about? Who are you?"

I sat back down at the table and hung my head, "My real name is Samuel Marlowe. My parents aren't share-croppers. My mother comes from a rich plantation family and we lived off her ample inheritance. That's how I was able to go to LSU. I was halfway through my junior year when I was accused of murdering one of fraternity brothers. We were studying together in the library late one night. We finished up and both of us went to our separate dorms. While my friend was walking back to his dorm someone beat him to death and left his body in the quadrangular. I was the last one with him so everyone thought I had killed him. He and I had been arguing over a girl for

some time. He had gotten the girl. I didn't kill him. I wouldn't kill anyone for a girl. I panicked. I didn't know what to do so I took all the money my parents had given me and got a Pullman car all the way out here. I thought I could change my name and be done with it all, leave it in the past, start anew. I even picked a name from The Great Gatsby, Carraway…I was such a fool. After I found Marguerite dead this morning I called my friend Homer to see if he could help me hide the body. He has friends that do muscle work for some mob guys. When I called Homer he told me two detectives had been looking for a Samuel Marlowe. These two detectives had shown Homer a picture of me taken at some party. Homer was angry and he hung up. I'm sorry I lied, I am. I wanted to become someone else, someone better. I wanted to be rich and famous. I wanted to be like you. I wanted it all to go away. I didn't know what to do. I was stupid to have my picture show up like that. You have to help me. You're my only friend in the world. I have nowhere else to go. I have nothing but our friendship."

Fitzgerald sat there taking it all in. Surprisingly he laughed, "You're just like Gatsby, just like him." He had tears in his eyes. "I can't believe you would kill anyone. I trust you even if you did lie to me. That would make for one hell of a book. What are you gonna do? What about your family? "

"What about them?"

"Do they know about all this? Are you going to see them ever again?"

"They know all of it except the bit here in LA. I don't know if I will ever see them again. If I go to jail, Scott, I cannot got to jail for this, I just cant. I have to get out of this city."

Fitzgerald's eyes reflected some kind of scheme mixed with a sadness that had been festering for a long time, "You need to get out of the country. You risk too much by staying around where American law enforcement can see you. You need to go some place safe. We are close to the border. Would you consider living in Mexico?"

"I don't know. Isn't that a little much?"

"Too many people know you in the states. In Mexico you could blend in, start a new life."

"I thought I had a new life," I couldn't think of any other options that didn't include me being chased by cops throughout every state, "Mexico it is."

"You can stay there till things blow over. While you're there send your parents a letter explaining everything. If they're rich like you say they are; they can get you out of this mess."

"I don't speak good Spanish."

"You'll learn with time, you'll have to."

"Can you drive me down to the border?"

Fitzgerald sighed and shook his head.

"Let me get my keys."

"You really believe me? You're not playing along?"

"Sam, you saved my life. Regardless of your crimes; I owe you a favor. All things considered, yes, I do believe you."

"Thank you. I don't know what else to say."

Fitzgerald went outside to talk with Sheilah. He came back in with his suit jacket and porkpie hat. All I had was my suitcase. I was on the run.

"Mr. Marlowe, are you ready to go?"

"Let's get out of here."

We climbed into Sheilah's car and set off through the streets of Los Angeles. The city was quiet. It was a Sunday. Every now and then a street car would pass loaded down with Sunday parishioners. The sun was bright; the clouds moved quickly across the sky; they looked like they were dancing and the light grew dim and bright as the clouds passed over the sun in ever quicker increments. I sat in the front seat with my head against the window while Fitzgerald drove. He would look over at me and pat me on the back. We made our way through the ghetto of South Los Angeles to come out clean on the outskirts of desert that led all the way to Tijuana and beyond. The rolling hills of California went on for miles in every direction. Dust picked up off of the floor of the earth sifted through the air landing wherever it could. Fitzgerald drove faster now. He was sweating, his hands shook violently. I think he was sad to see me leave him. We had done so well for so long. We had written and reveled. We had believed in the possibility of tomorrow. Now that optimism had grayed and faded into nothing. We kept driving for hours. We didn't stop till we got to the border. The police there let us through. We told them we were going to see the bullfights in Tijuana. They glanced over our car and waved us through. Just like that I was free. Once we were over the border; Fitzgerald made his way deep into a desert field off to the south west and stopped the car. He turned the car off and looked over at me. He kept quiet for a few minutes.

"Well, this is where we leave each other. Cut your hair and grow a beard. Don't go looking for trouble and none will come your way."

I started to sob again. I was scared by what the future held for me.

"I don't want to leave you alone, Scott. We had it so good for that little stretch of months. We could have had so much more."

"Sam, you have no choice. Make your way to Mexico City; I know some people there who can take care of you, some fellows I met in the South of France. I don't want to see you go either. You saved my life…I'm gonna finish that book. I know it's gonna be great. I'm gonna visit Zelda too, tell her all about you. She would have liked you."

"Do whatever you can. I will pray for you. You're fighting time. You need to quit drinking, it's killing you. Get that book published or I'm hunting you down."

"We both need to quit drinking. I'm gonna get your stuff published too…I'll use the Carraway name for now. Those stories can make you famous. I'll send the money along with a letter after a while. It's time to get going kid…Here, take this hundred." He handed me some bills. "It'll last you till you get to my friends in Mexico City. Good luck. You have the world against you. It's time to fight back."

I didn't know what to say; I didn't know how to thank him. He sat there with his head against the window. He sighed, his eyes closed, "Look at what they do to us. Look at what they make us become."

"Who?" I asked.

"Them…Everyone you've ever known. They all want a piece of you. They don't leave you with anything…All this time and all this sadness for what? Don't listen to me. You're still young. You can still make good choices. Leave. Go. I will contact you soon."

I opened the door and slammed it shut. Fitzgerald looked me in the eye and said, "Find your green light at the end of the dock. Once you have it, never let it go. I'll see you again; I promise."

His car pulled away in a storm cloud of dust. He stuck his hand out the window and waved. I just stood there misty-eyed waiting for the car to disappear beyond the horizon. I was alone at last. Mexico stretched out endlessly before me.

IV

About a year later I heard the news of Fitzgerald's death. He had had a massive heart attack. He had moved in with Sheila Graham so she could take care of him. She had found him face down on the floor of her living room. That poor son-of-a-bitch; he never got to finish his novel. I wasn't surprised by his death. He had run his body ragged for years. When I got the telegram from Sheilah I collapsed on the floor and lay there for hours. He was finally gone.

Edmund Wilson was having his unfinished novel published as a final monument to Fitzgerald's soaring genius. My stuff got published too. Fitzgerald came through for me; he quit drinking. He fought so damn hard to finish. He wrote until the very end.

About three months after that day at the border I got a letter from him with the money from the stories. In the letter he told me he had turned things around. He was excited about his final novel. He said it was his best yet. From the way he wrote I could tell he was feeling better. It was already too late. His body had already decided its own failure. The police came by Fitzgerald's house looking for me. He told them I had fled to Chicago. They were trying to find Enrique too; they thought we had worked together in planning Marguerite's murder. The case will be dropped soon enough. The Los Angeles Police Department will do anything to save face. They'll bring some street-toughs in for murder. I kept that letter he sent me; I want to remember our friendship, those days we spent together writing, conquering the world. The Jazz Age died with Fitzgerald and it isn't coming back. People are never what you think.

Mexico is a world away from Los Angeles. The people here are tranquil. They move at a slower pace. They listen when you speak, smile when you smile. Mexico City is a carnival. There is music in the street at night. The women remind me of Marguerite; their hair sweeps around behind them when they dance. But I still haven't met one with green eyes. My days are spent writing. I wake up early and explore the different barrios. I eat well and still continue to drink. The words come naturally now. I type and my created worlds come together in streaks of image and imagination. Late at night, while I sit in bed and look out the window, I see women pass and I swear they are Marguerite. Somehow they are never quite as beautiful as her. This city holds me by the heart and it won't let me go. I am opening my arms and running into the future.

That day when Fitzgerald left me at the border I saw a coyote making its way across the landscape. It had been beaten. The coyote's fur was patchy, blood trickled in rivulets in the dirt where it walked, and its mouth was caked with mud and bark. It walked by me and stopped to lie down in the dirt. It turned its head to look at me. His eyes never left my face as I walked away to find the highway. When I had been walking for a few minutes he was still lying there all alone. The dust and shadow of evening settled over him till I could no longer make out his figure. I walked toward the highway in the twilight. A green light was shining in the distance.

Justin Lafreniere

Fiction

Before this story there was silence. Not the "lack of a universe, there is no God only the oblivion of vastness and space and sorrow" sort of silence. Before this story I was out sitting in a gazebo made of wood with fake knotholes and warped planks next to a playground screaming with the deaf memories and visions of children playing on it. Off to the northwest, there's the manmade lake of no particular importance. The clouds are the shape of polished and fluffed aluminum but they make no noise.

Then the story begins. Not with a roar. Nor a whisper. It begins with me getting up from the gazebo and starting to walk out when a voice calls out a name. Not even my name or at least not the name I go by anymore. It's the name I used to use before I got older, before I started preferring Jackson because it sounds distinguished and mature.

"Jacky, why are you sitting outside my garden?"

Because the flowers smell nice because the air is clean because in college I meant to tell you I loved you but couldn't.

"Because I'm back from Boston and thought it would be important to visit. Is that a problem, Danielle?"

Of course it's a problem because, well, look at the reasons stated above.

"No. But you should probably come inside before the storm starts."

Your husband will be angry.

"Mark will be angry."

"Mark left two years ago. Come inside. Get some coffee."

After this story there will be things. Not the sort of things like a keyboard to type the story on or a phone to call mother with, or anything of that nature. There will be things like an awkward date, a third marriage, a misunderstanding followed by sex in an empty room where even the bed is gone, two kids separated by a miscarriage, twelve doctors appointments for four broken bones. There will be college lessons and wisdom and love. There will be intangible things. There will be more things than these and then there will be deaths and maybe there will be more silence.

Justin Lafreniere

Sledding

I don't remember the way the snow laid out over the hill. It must have been a normal New England winter morning, where grey and white clouds teem to the brim of the horizon, bulging as if to crush or cuddle the small town under them. Dan and Mike and I took our sleds out early. We walked over the sandlot field, leaving our footprints on the flat white deck of snow. It took us a while, but we ended up way outside of town, the outskirts of where our parents would allow us to go. There was this hill that, according to Dan, would have us flying at a hundred miles an hour, faster than car or train or Sonic the Hedgehog. Dan even dared to say faster than Flash Gordon. It was a little hard to believe, but it'd certainly be worth a walk through the cold to find out.

The first hill Dan took us to was tiny, a little knot in the earth. We decided to ride down it, more out of pity than excitement. Mike went first. He jumped on the sled with a running start to get more speed and wiggled back and forth as he went down the slope until his sled flipped and he went headfirst into the powder. He pulled himself to his feet. Snow hung on his pale nose and in his blonde buzz cut. We were still at the age where we had buzz cuts because we thought they sounded tough.

I went next. The snow kicked up, into my eyes and on my ears so that even the sound of the wind and Mike yelling were cold, so cold. The sled bobbed through the white dust and I threw my weight back and forth, like I was trying to carve through invisible veins. The hill was pretty steep. Everything rushing by felt, sounded, looked like empty whiteness.

The sled came to a gentle rest at the bottom.

Dan started down while I brushed out the floor of my sled. It was cold even through the gloves my baby sister gave me for Christmas. They were red, the same red as my sled. I was brushing them off on my snow pants when I heard Dan yelling. Something small and white and fast flew over my head. For a second I thought it was a little bird. Mike was laughing. A snowball flew over my head. It hit something with a sort of puffing sound and Mike frowned. He must have missed. Grabbing a handful of snow, he balled it up tight and threw again. There was a sloppy thud, like when someone bounces a wet ten-

nis ball against the ground. Dan groaned and there was another puff, this one heavier, and Dan's empty sled bumped into my ankle. I turned around. Dan laid flat, hands over his heart like a dead cowboy in one of those old westerns. His tongue, the color of my baby sister's favorite teddy bear, hung out of his mouth.

"You think I killed him?" Mike smiled and his teeth were straight and white like hard snow.

"I hope so. More hot chocolate for us then." Dan sprung up and slogged down the rest of the slope. He looked like a blue cloud in a colorless sky; his legs moved awkwardly underneath him but he kept his feet until he got to us. Mike pushed him and they both waddled back and fell over like cartoons, like they were in slow motion. I laughed. Dan's cheeks were getting redder, almost the color of his hair.

We gathered our sleds and started walking towards a tree line in front of us. Dan promised the super big hill was just on the other side of them. He kept on bragging about how it was his hill, he was the one who'd found it when he was out driving to Amherst to see his brother in college. Mike and I looked at each other. We both shrugged. We kept going.

Dan was right. The hill was awesome, tall and steep. I was facing him and Mike and walking backwards, carelessly tromping through the snow. My foot went backwards; it stood on the air and then fell through like a fat guy on thin ice. I tumbled heels over head backwards and landed on the slope face first. It was freezing and wet. Dan pulled me up while Mike grabbed my sled before it tumbled to the bottom. They were both laughing at me.

We set the sleds down and looked out over the hill. It was like a whole new world. The slope dropped hard and fast, as if it was the frozen trail of a nosediving jet. At the end, it sort of arched up, then flattened out. If we got enough speed, we could definitely get some air.

"Wicked." Dan smiled. Green eyes widened under his snow hat. I looked over at Mike, our fearless leader. He was a weird mix of red and pale grayish, like white crayon on blue paper. "Mike, you go first." Dan nudged him in the shoulder but Mike shook his head quick.

"No way. Your hill, you go first."

"You're scared," Dan's smile turned into a set of flat, dull lips. "Aren't ya?"

"No. Your hill, your turn. And besides, I went first last time." Dan didn't respond. He set down his sled and got on and gave me the thumbs up. I gave him a little push with my boot. It all inched forwards very slowly, so slowly, towards the edge. Then everything went

over. His blue jacket raced down. The yellow sled jumped under him. I thought he was going to crash and burst into a billion little pieces. It just kept getting faster, faster. He hit the little hiccup at the bottom, went over the top. I thought for sure he was going to die. The sled and his blue body went airborne and separated in midair before they started back to the ground. The sled landed on the far side of another snow bank, gone like it had never existed at all. Dan landed on his side at the top of the same bank. He was dead. He had to be.

He stood up, raised both arms in glory. He looked so far way as he danced. Then he waved for us to come down. Maybe he shouted up to us. If he did, his words landed with little puffs in the snow.

"You scared?" I asked Mike.

"Yeah. You?"

"Yes." I was beyond scared. "You want to go next?"

"Not really. You?"

"Not really."

From the bottom of the hill, there was a puffing roar. It was something unfamiliar, not really to my ears but more to the surroundings. I looked around for the cause. Mike pointed down to the bottom of the hill. A snowplow was coming, chugging around the bend, pushing the snow in a slow growl. It was moving a huge white wall. The little hiccup of a hill where Dan got launched into the air was the near guardrail, buried under a mound of snow. The plow rolled on, shoving the wall forwards to where the snow and sky seemed to melt together. In a bit, it was gone and the trail was the only sign it'd ever been there at all.

"Is this even safe? I mean, that's a road down there. What if a car comes or something?"

"It won't. The road has to be closed. My dad always says they close off the roads when it snows like this." I believed Mike. His dad was a cop. "Rock, paper, scissors to see who goes?" Mike asked.

I had to lick my lips before I could respond. "Sure." The words came out with curled fog. We started beating our hands into our palms and counting out: "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot." Mike's hand stopped moving. Long open fingers, palm face down. He grabbed my clenched fist tight. His eyes were sort of blue, like ice should be, and he looked scared.

"You go."

I put my sled at the top of the hill, got in. Steep. God it was steep. Putting my hands behind me into the snow, I felt the chill moving through my gloves, into my fingers, up my arms. I gave a little push

and the sled inched forward, the nose wobbly dangling over the edge. Another little push. The sled took off under me. The wind howled past. It pushed, hard and cold, wanting to hold me from the bottom. It seemed as if everything was a breach of an invisible and icy wall. It wanted to kill me. It felt like I was bursting into blue and white flames. It felt like everything was alive.

Halfway down the hill. Something pierced the cold wall, a shout from Mike, a cheer from Dan. Maybe neither, maybe it was all the howling in my head. Cold wind. I weaved the sled back and forth a little. The jump was coming. The noise sounded again. It was not Dan. It was not Mike. Maybe it was the wind.

It was the wind. It was the wind in the wake of a car, speeding from the left. It was invisible but louder than anything I have ever heard, the sound of the engine and the tires and the coming. The sled bounced when it hits the jump. The car was a green long and old sedan. It had foggy windows and rust on the rear passenger-side door. It had a broken antenna. It is traveling so slowly. My sled and I, we, we were faster than a car, faster than a train, faster than a bullet. The sled slipped from under me. We stopped. It was just my floating body and the car was right there. It had to be going fast but seems to stop, to still, to cease.

I did not land with a puff. I did not hear the sound I make. The snow and icy fog blowing from the tires slipped between everything; pants, jacket, shirt and hat. It was all cold. My face was up facing the colorless sky, the sky looming down to crush all of western Massachusetts. Mike was sliding down the hill now. He moved fast like Dan and the car and my sled. He bailed into the snow before hitting the jump. He plodded through and leaned over me. The car stopped, there were people outside. They were shouting, someone was crying, Dan spoke very fast about something. Everything in my body started to hurt all at once.

My eyes closed. When they open, everyone had moved and there is a big white box, red lights everywhere. An ambulance. I smiled. There was something warm and red trickling down my forehead, something that felt like blood to my fingers. It couldn't have been my blood though. I looked up at the white of the hill with the sled veins carved into them, down at the snow with little spots of red on them from someone's blood. It couldn't have been my blood. I looked up into that big winter New England sky and I knew I was invincible.

Justin Lafreniere

Look Out Kid: Our Story From Desolation Row

Welcome to a city recovering from the recession, a place with a long memory that still dwells on the times when the plywood covered windows like a funeral shroud and all the "OPEN" signs that had once been lit were left to lie out in the dark streets. Johnny and Whitman were just two kids in the town, coming of age as all do. After Whitman had returned from a one year stint at the state college, he and Johnny returned to the old habit of loitering with a bunch of the guys outside the Irish pub on —— Street, hoping to look pitiful enough for a blue collar bum to buy them a beer. The girls gathered at the soda shop across the street, sipping on milkshakes and gossip, loudly talking about passersby and their clothes, their dogs, their hair, their anything that would keep the useless conversation going. Sometime in late afternoon, after the church bells rang at a random time, the sexes would mingle in an empty lot on the corner. People'd go off into groups, cliques and couples, some people looking to hook-up and some looking to hang out. The only time it changed is when the sailors came into port. For those two weeks, girls stayed off the streets to stay away from the grabby hands of men who'd been at sea much too long. Navy folks are the worst. Every single time, they'd tear up the Madame Vesper's salon that doubled as a brothel.

Let me give you an idea of this place. Sometimes the mayor would come through this part of the city on his way to a late dinner at the Thai restaurant downtown, his wife usually already there. She was a fucking character. They'd met during his stint as a ringleader in a circus, when she was a high wire artist. From the pictures, she looked more like a hooker on dental floss. My mother always said the only reason he'd married her was that he'd looked up her skirt so many times during her act that he'd begun to feel duty-bound. Maybe it's a little tragically ironic he'd lose his eyesight a decade later. His son came home from the war totally changed. They got in a fight when they were both in a drunken stupor and the mayor got popped across the temple with a lamp. He developed hemorrhaging behind his eyes and now is bound to live in a world of shadows. But whenever he came through downtown, we all stopped to notice. He had this weird charisma, something you'd never expect from someone that looked so much like a plush doll.

That was before this place became a wasteland T.S Elliot would have been proud of. According to the old guys that play checkers out in front of the last independent coffee shop in town, during the Great Depression, even the mongrel dogs didn't come to this city. Whitman knew when he left for college that this place was in the middle of a rough patch. He came back to—well, that's what this story is about—and he's been dancing between running away and coming back ever since.

They call this place Desolation Row. It ain't exactly a row, per se. It's more like the entire city. The name came from Whitman's last day here before he left for college, a night that all the guys got so belligerently drunk they couldn't fucking see. Half of them lit up joints in the cars as Whitman, sober as a bird, drove around the empty streets. Eventually, they wandered down to where all the youth with no direction and no responsibilities ended up: the docks. The ships, tethered and unmanned, were nothing but large pieces of flotsam in the night. Talk began about how dead this place was. Dead seas, dead houses. Even if the mayor, when he wasn't feeling himself up to videos of his wife, said the economy was strong, everyone could tell otherwise. When even the high school kids know that a place is fucked, that's a problem.

Johnny had a can of spray-paint in his backpack. As we pulled onto Main Street and drove past the darkened store fronts, Whitman got the best idea of his young life. Stopping at the corner, he took the paint and tagged the sidewalk, the buildings on the corner, then stood on the roof of the car to change the street sign.

In orange paint, he named this place Desolation Row.

Whitman met this girl the autumn next. Between her and the season, the city would damn near collapse. Whitman was sitting on the stoop of Allen Zimmerman's house, listening to him playing some flamenco shit on an old classical guitar that used to be his grandfather's. She came out of the soda shop, walked their way with her head down, as if she knew the sidewalk by heart. Jesus Christ, she was gorgeous, Whitman thought. Chica had eyes like that pale green of a busted streetlight. Her hair was black as the windows of the abandoned warehouses out near the wharf, except for this strand that ran up her ponytail, across her head, and down her sharp bangs. That single stripe was red and bounced when she walked. It looked like a fox diving into a burrow. It was a small match in a dark room.

Whitman watched her for a minute with that vague interest every guy gets in a pretty girl before he turned back to Zimmy. He started dancing, goofing off. Maybe for her benefit, maybe not. Hard to say. He walked down the thick stone railing, one foot in front of the other like the mayor's tight-rope walking wife. Jumping down off the end with a little grace, he came down in the center of her sidewalk. If he'd been paying attention, he'd have seen her walking towards him. But he didn't. Whitman just damn near landed on her head. She leapt back and I stumbled on my P.F Flyers into a Buick parked on the street. Half-turning to face her, I gave her a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

"No problem. Look out, kid." She gave him an awkward smile. Walking past, she went about ten feet before she turned back with this weird grin and the lame romantic comedy gaze. It gave you the feeling you were watching someone wink with their eyes open. Whitman ran up to catch her and asked for her name.

"Cinderella. Yours?"

"Romeo." She smiled, told me I was in the wrong part of Verona.

"No, this place is the perfect American Verona." She looked curiously at him, but he kept talking, wildly and with odd haste. "It's the perfect place for the tragedy of two star-crossed lovers. Nobody comes to wive it wealthily on Desolation Row. But love…love can be done." Whitman smiled. She shrugged and began to walk away, nonchalantly. She stopped at the corner.

"My name is Samantha."

On the first date, Whitman was broke. He'd decided to take Samantha out on Thursday, didn't get paid until Friday and had taken Johnny out drinking on Wednesday night. Johnny had explained," It was hump day and I wanted to hump something, so we need to go party." The owner of the house was an older guy with wild gray hair and a Robin Hood complex—he took all the liquor Whitman and Johnny brought and divided it among the house. The handles of alcohol were being passed around like a joint and vanishing like fucking Houdini. But it was hard to care. Much.

Sometime during the night, Robin Hood decided he wanted to talk to Whitman about physics all night. Never in the mood for a drunk to assail his ears with stuttering intoxicated babble, Whitman told him science was fake and just a method of controlling the lower classes, preventing them from gaining true enlightenment and knowledge of what was actually going

on. Traditional bullshit answer to a drunken bullshit discussion. Robin Hood laughed, told Whitman that he was probably right, before excusing himself to go mingle with other guests and make a phone call. After a few hours, he came back over to chat, asked Whitman about my guitar playing.

"I never told you I played guitar."

The man looked nervous. He put his hand on Whitman's shoulder. "You hang out with Zimmerman. Zimmerman only tolerates the best and brightest. He told me. And besides, Johnny keeps on bragging about you upstairs." A smile uneasily came across his face, before he started going off on another tangent. He apparently used to be in some band that Whitman had only heard of in passing, something his parents used to dig.

He went upstairs, brought down a Dobro and a mandolin, and hooked both up to an amp. Johnny referred to it as an electric violin the whole night. Dumbass. A few guys played some country music, some stuff Whitman had never heard of. He told them they ought to start a band, but then a fight broke out over what the name would be. The Band or Self-Portrait or What Is This Shit all became options, all heatedly discussed. Johnny settled it by breaking out a bong and getting everyone but Whitman so high they thought the joints were huge, expanding into the size of drainpipes. The host got stoned to where he couldn't say his alphabet. He couldn't get past Q, no matter how hard he thought about it and even when Whitman gave him the answer. He tried about a million times. Johnny thought he was a monk who had taken a vow of silence. That wasn't bad actually. But then he started trying to bum cigarettes without saying anything and just got obnoxious. Smoking drainpipes. Idiots.

Anyway. Back to Whitman and Samantha's first date. Walking in the park, they held hands like all new couples: tentatively and with great suspicion. They talked about their lives, which would become simplified to "nothing" in the post-date summary to their friends. Samantha explained she moved here in the year that Whitman had spent at State. While he was at college, she was apparently interning with this art magazine that everyone talked about but few read. She was damn smart and with that affinity for asking probing questions, simply for the catharsis that comes when an answer comes. Something like that feeling of completing something useless but strenuous. . She pushed a few about ex-girlfriends and tried to make Whitman feel better by mentioning her ex-boyfriend a few times. Whitman had known him. He was a prick, one of those guys who liked to flaunt about how many girls he had fucked.

"So I guess you're pretty easy, huh? I mean, that's the only type he dated when I knew him."

"Fuck off." She reached a hand up to brush the hair out of my eyes, but stopped, as if he was untouchable or something. "Your exes don't speak any better for you."

"Have you been asking around?" He sat down on a concrete railing.

"Maybe. I mean, I'd only do that if I actually liked you. But since you think I'm easy…"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insinuate you were a siren or a whore or anything."

"It's alright. It takes one to know one." She smiled, reached forwards and grabbed his hat. Light-footed, she took off giggling, running through the park with him chasing behind her.

Random fact #347 about Desolation Row: One summer, an Italian yacht sunk at dawn in a huge storm a few miles off the coast. A few brave anglers and the coastguard rescued about half of the crew. That was this town's Titanic. Since it wasn't a hurricane, the tempest never got a name. In posthumous honor of one of the rescuers who drowned, we started calling those storms Neros. The first one ever seemed like it had all the wrath of Neptune in it. Now, let's get back to our real story.

It was one of those nights. One of those when the beer was never enough, liquor seemed like a bad idea, and you just didn't want to go home. Whitman and Samantha stayed at the pub so late the barkeep ran out of conversation, started talking about the weather and his kids and anything to stop the awkward silence. He'd finish a sentence and go back to dutifully cleaning a glass with a towel. Samantha didn't say anything at all, just sipped at her drink and played with a quarter, flicking it so it spun across the bar.

"So where to next, Cinderella?"Whitman asked. Samantha looked at her glass, gave it an evil eye. She took a last swig of whatever she was drinking, very ladylike in a trashy 1920s flapper way.

"I want to go to Carnival Hill." Three miles north of the city, that place gave you the prettiest vista of the city, day or night. Whitman laughed. Carnival Hill was also the town's lip lock knoll. He told her that Johnny had been there with four different girls and couldn't tell you a thing about the view. Well, not the scenic view anyway. Whitman had been there twice and could pick out the street names by the dots on the skyline.

Samantha got off the barstool, stumbled a bit and latched onto his arm. She had a half-drunken smile and winked with fully drunk eyes. They paid the tab and headed outside into one of those nights where the sky looks like a fake lid. No moon in the sky that night. As they walked towards the car, they listened closely to the city. It was whispering with its dysfunctions.

The twins Whitman knew growing up, who down the block, Alex and Carl, were sitting on their fire escape, smoking weed. In two years, they'll be doing this again in late December, with a light snow on falling around them. Carl will offer Alex some shrooms. Poor hallucinating Alex, thinking his brother was a monster, fell to his death. When they do the autopsy, they find Alex died from exposure during the night. His brother was too high to call an ambulance.

Whitman and Samantha stop by their car, holding hands more surely than they had in the park. They do not speak, they think they know all of it already. But who can know all of it? That's why the town's fortunetelling shop closed a week earlier.
The old hag who'd run it had quit, saying she predicted bad things for this town. That old bitch took her hunchbacked assistant and her crystal ball and got the hell out of town.

Our couple of note got into the car and drove towards Carnival Hill slowly. Cops on Desolation Row were terrible at night, loved picking on teenagers and kids and anyone who wasn't safely tucked away in their beds. At a red light on Main, a girl Whitman knew from high school sauntered out of one of the alleyways, knocked on the passenger window. He recognized her from when she'd read the role of Ophelia in one of his English classes. She'd tried to turn the role of Ophelia into some sort of heroine who killed herself because that was the only way to save Hamlet. But no one could have saved Hamlet. A year later, she'd gotten pregnant from some deadbeat; she'd dropped out and became a stripper and then moved on to a full-fledged hooker. Predictable story, really. She rapped on the window again. Whitman threw the car into park and stepped on the gas, revving his engine loudly in the quiet night. The prostitute ran back to her hiding place, waited for a minute before she dared to peek out her face. It was hardly illuminated by the rainbow sign for Noah's Ark, the strip club she probably worked at. She watched the car the whole way as they drove down the block, out of the city.

Samantha and Whitman parked along the crest of the Hill. Decades later, he'd still remember what she looked like, her naked body backlit by the glowing city lights.

Two weeks later, Samantha wanted to do something exciting. She'd met Whitman at the docks in the middle of the afternoon. They'd done what all young adults want to do as much as possible: sit all day talking, doing nothing. They walked down to dinner at a fast-food joint because it was there and quick. Whitman didn't mind that she was a cheap date. Rent was due soon.

"Let's go to the warehouses." Samantha sprang out of the ugly red booth and nodded towards the door

"What?" Whitman knew it was just something to do. She said she knew how to get up on the roof of one of the buildings, said there was a telescope set up there and they could look at the stars and continue doing nothing. Apparently she didn't know that on Desolation Row, we had stints where even the moon didn't show for a couple weeks. During Nero season. But Whitman decided to take her anyway. It could be fun, you know?

She led him through the streets, until they were off Desolation Row. There was a part of the docks with another name, a place considered safe from the absurdities of Desolation Row because it was so absurd in its own right: the Captain's Tower. The warehouses used to be a part of a major bootlegging operation. The bar where Johnny and Whitman always hung out at had been an old speakeasy in the 1910s. Some even said the ghosts of mobsters and underlings who died brutal deaths haunted the docks. You could hear them scream if you listened closely. I'd heard them, when I was sixteen and Johnny stole his dad's car and went out there.

According to local folk lore, the state police named all the mob bosses after famous writers, sort of as a way to keep track of them and detail their personalities a bit. Milton was a blind boss; Poe had an affinity for chopping up bodies. But the two that ran the docks were Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot. Only the police ever knew how they got those nicknames; the town never heard why they were called that. Everyone just knew that one day they both disappeared. But, that's Desolation Row for you.

The night was a little brisker than usual for the season. They hurried through night and she led me through a gap in the fence, seven paces from the third window. Climbing up a black steel fire escape, we got on the roof. There was a telescope there. Samantha kissed Whitman on the cheek.

Samantha tugged on his ear and whispered, "Watch the stars and you may see God. Or at least an explosion of millions of pounds of gas billions of light years away." Whitman hardly heard it. He was a little distracted. The

telescope pointed at an awkward angle and it certainly wasn't looking at the sky. He looked through. It stared at a door to one of the warehouses.

"Why would you put a telescope there?" Samantha didn't know what for, didn't much care. She bumped Whitman away from the eyepiece and swung the scope around. After a few minutes scanning the stars, she started looking at the other rooftops.

"Hey…Whitman?" She almost never called him by name. He looked up at her, eyebrows raised. "There are more telescopes on each of the buildings. All pointed towards the other one." She stepped aside so he could look. It was fucking weird. It was one of those things no one would ever have noticed if they weren't looking for it. Whitman told her they should get the out of there. Suspicious things in Desolation Row had a tendency to drift towards the tragic. He looked back into the scope and swung it to the left. As he did, a red light started to glow over one of the warehouse gates and alarms started to sound. He was about to back away, but stopped when he caught glimpse a telescope pointed directly at them. A shady figure pulled back from the lens, pointed in their direction.

"Fucking hell." Whitman muttered. He grabbed Samantha and sprinted for the ladder. They ran for it. They didn't stop running until they got to her apartment complex.

A few nights later, Whitman and Johnny were hanging out in the park, talking about what they were going to do about work and school and rent. A man came from down the street, approached slowly. He was dressed like a government goon from a British movie. Black trench coat, stupid bowler hat. A real piece of government work. The way his feet scratched on the sidewalk, he could have been heard from four miles out.

"Evening, boys." He tipped his queer little cap. Johnny smiled, nodded drunkenly. Whitman gave Johnny the "for the love of God, don't let your drunken ass say a damn thing" look but he opened his chapped lips anyway.

"Hey man, I dig your cap."

"Thanks, kid. How are you two doing tonight?"

Johnny smiled big. "Great. You got any weed?"

Whitman closed his eyes and dropped his head. The guy could have been a narc or a druggie willing to kill for a fix or basically any sort of moral citizen and Johnny's dumb mouth was going to get them in to trouble.

"I might. What's your name?"

"Johnny."

"Whitman."

The old man stiffened, looked them over. The well-polished shoes moved backwards a half step and a hand went into his pocket, dug around in the jacket as if he was looking for a pocket watch. Whitman thought the man thought he was about to become a mugging victim and wanted to give an accurate time on the police report. Perhaps he and Johnny looked a little suspect, sitting in the middle of the park at one in the morning, staring at the stars, but not like muggers. Muggers don't ask for weed and give names.

He wasn't looking for a watch though. He pulled out a pistol and pointed it at Whitman. Told him to stand. Johnny flipped out, tries to scamper away and he ran smack into some freak that got recruited from professional wrestling or the discard pile of the World's Strongest Man contest. The park that had been cold, dark and welcoming all of a sudden lit up like batty Aunt Thelma's living room on Christmas Eve. A few technicolor spotlights hit their eyes, blinding everyone for a second. Then they moved off, sweeping out somewhere on the bay. Whitman counted six people: the suit with the gun; the mammoth-sized freak; two more suits; and two guys in tights and masks. One had a cape that picked up the wind and sounded like a whip's crack when it changed directions.

"You two are coming with us." The big one had a Slavic accent. Whitman stood up took a step back. The two with masks jumped at him. He swung a wild fist, popped one in his cloth face and felt it give like he'd hit a pillow. The other grappled with his free arm, took his feet out from under him. Whitman's cheek hit the concrete hard.

"Get the fuck off me. Who the hell are you? An Alan Moore nightmare they let out? Let me go." When I moved, he slammed me back to the pavement. The big guy took a step closer. I just groaned in submission.

The bowler hat spoke. "You two are under arrest for violating curfew and trespassing on government property."

Another voice shouted, "Kill them now, they know too much." The one that Whitman had punched pulled himself to his feet and repeated "Kill, kill, kill."

Whitman struggled against them again. "Know too much? What the he—are you guys the goddamned thought police or something?"

"They know! They know all about the plan to raise a new society, a new utopia. They know that we're going to start the invasion on Desolation Row!"

"We don't know anything. Dude, you've given us more informa-

tion trying to arrest us than we could have found out on our own." Whitman prayed for Jimmy to keep his mouth shut. God, he hated drunk people.

The two biggest guys picked up Johnny and Whitman and put them over their shoulders like sacks of manure and brought them over towards a car that had pulled up with a screech. They tossed the two kids in the back of a car and tried to blindfold Whitman, but the tie of one of the portly, suited men slipped down so he could watch as they drove around the block. They made a left turn, drove a mile, made another, passed down a side street and ended up exactly where they'd started. The plan must not have been to take them far—they went around the block a few more times, then pulled into the complex that housed the warehouse Whitman had broken into that night with Samantha. They got Whitman out of the car, left Johnny in it, and drove off. One of them pushed him through the door

"Welcome," said whichever one of the kidnapping crew had been driving, "to the Heart-Attack Machine."

The thing was huge. Gears as big as garbage trucks spun with hesitation and a whirl that sounded like the whole damn world was coming down around your ears. And with each slipping cog, the machine shook like a massive dinosaur limping through a tar pit. Through a conduit, junk funneled in on a conveyor belt, into the mouth of the beast. Out the other end, huge chunks of metal fell into a steel dumpster. Everything seemed to be going to the soundtrack of a car crash.

There were smallish men with shaved heads moving to the dumpster every few seconds, grabbing huge chunks of steel and taking them towards the back of the warehouse, far enough away where Whitman couldn't quite see them. They walked with a shifting gate, almost as if they were dancing to offbeat music with every step.

Whitman swallowed the saliva that had built with his fear and asked the guy with the bowler what he was here for. The man snapped his fingers, looking towards the far wall as a kid came hustling forwards. Well, Whitman thought it was a kid until it got into the light. It was an old man, maybe in his fifties, and his back looked like it'd been broken a few times. Whitman was not a doctor and damn near flunked biology and anatomy, but knew instantly that this guy had been hit a steamroller or something seriously fucked up.

The man in the bowler cap took some papers out of the briefcase. "We've brought you here for gross ignorance, negligence and dangerous thought practices. You'll be charged and arraigned later, but for tonight, you stay in a cell. Tomorrow, your work with the Machine starts." He passed

the briefcase back, whistled for two guards to escort Whitman to a tiny cell. From between the bars, he could see most of the factory's activity. Something was strapped to the shoulders of all the men carrying the scrap. Every few minutes, they'd twitch and there would be this horrible ringing in his ears. Like being locked in a little room with a large bell. It took him an hour of watching these guys to realize that when the din started and the marching men shook, they were being zapped with electricity from the apparatus on their shoulders. That must have been what they meant when they said the "Heart-Attack Machine."

The next day, Whitman wore the Heart-Attack Machine for the first time. And after that, he didn't remember anything for a while.

Samantha began to get a little nervous when didn't call in a week. That was definitely weird for Whitman. He was one of those eccentric guys who would call for no reason, sometimes at work, just checking up on me. Not creepy checking up, just seeing how the day was going, what the plans after work were, and did she prefer lilies to roses. Even if it was clingy, it's hard to argue when the guy is calling to know exactly which flowers to buy.

Samantha didn't really know what to do—filing a missing persons report for a guy she'd been dating for a little over a month yet seemed a little weird—so she walked down to talk it over with Dr. Filth, her psychiatrist.

Dr. Filth's practice was down near City Center, where the business district had been bustling before an earthquake scared away a few of the insurance companies. That was a hit to the economy, but the town managed to avoid a larger economic collapse. It just had to recentralize. The practice took patients until nine at night, because nothing really makes sense on Desolation Row. Samantha had asked once why they stayed open so late and a portly male nurse had told her that the doctors there think that working later in the day helps their patients better deal with problems.

The head doctor, Filth, was a cute old man, sweet and balding and always wearing either a white lab coat or a wool cardigan. She felt comfortable talking to him, more so than she had with the counselors at school. Her appointment was at five on a Friday, so the street in front of the office was an awkward mix of businessmen who had slipped out early to begin their weekend binge drinking and others who were on the way to it. Ties were half-undone and some even had begun to smell of vodka and rum and stale lives.

After the waiting room's usual wait, Samantha was asked back to the rear of the office. The only thing she didn't like about her appointments was the place; this building used to be an abandoned police station and, in a past life, this place had been an interrogation room. The new purpose, which really wasn't all that different from the old one, hadn't really changed and neither had the appearance. Drab walls. She'd have killed for a nice beige in here, or a fuchsia or something to make it at least a little less depressing.

"So Samantha, how can I help you today?" Dr. Filth asked, smiling and bobbing his head as she told him the whole story of Whitman. Well, almost the whole story. She left out the telescopes and that night on Carnival Hill.

"Well, Samantha," Filth paused mid sentence and took a sip from his coffee mug. It was an ugly little contraption, covered it in a leather sort of coozie that kept the heat from burning his frail and wrinkled hands. "How have things been going since you broke up with that last boyfriend? Any male problems before this new guy's disappearance?" She told him no. He started asking questions about her love life—not my romantic life but her love life, to put it discreetly. He told her she was spending too many late nights alone. Called me "sexless." Samantha didn't even know that word could refer to that.

A nurse came in during the middle of the session and started whispering to him. The practice housed some more severe patients who sometimes interrupted other sessions when they needed more urgent care. Dr. Filth's whole demeanor changed suddenly. He got up from the chair quickly, headed outside. Samantha heard vague whistling, then clanging, like someone had slammed shut a large gate. Dr. Filth was gone for almost ten minutes before he came back in, this time with a squat man in a dark suit. Filth didn't say anything, just let his eyes dart back and forth along the smooth walls and a silence came over the room. Samantha got goosebumps.

The little man spoke. "Were you on the roof of a warehouse down on the docks in the past three weeks?" Samantha shook her head. "Are you lying to me?" The man pulled out handcuffs and took a step towards her. Dr. Filth seemed shorter now, meaner too. Samantha had never noticed how ugly he was until then. She was about to ask about why I was going to be arrested, but a nurse opened the door a crack and shouted for help. Filth reached for the door; it swung open and a nurse and three patients in white straightjackets, wrapped up like mummies with eyes that didn't look quite sane, spilled in. Their hands had all come free. One tackled the doctor, held him up against

the wall. Another grabbed the cup and chucked the leather-bound mug at the barred window. It shattered, sprinkling shards across the floor. Blue and green liquid dribbled out and the tile floor looked like it had a world map melted on it.

The nurse grabbed at the little man in the suit as she tried to get to her feet. A patient tackled them both like he was a linebacker who really needed to get some anger out. Samantha sprinted for the door as fast as she could, grabbing the manila folder that kept my psychiatric record off the desk as she went. Doctors came running in, ignoring her as they pulled out nightsticks from under their lab coats to deal with the more aggressive patients. When she got towards the waiting room, she noticed there were more guys in black suits standing near a sedan outside. She ran the other way, ducked into an unmarked room. There were beakers everywhere. She grabbed a white coat and put it on, hoping it would hide her from the police who might not know every doctor and orderly who worked in the building. The din from the interrogation room grew louder; she headed up the stairs on to the second floor. Maybe she could get out of out through a back door. She checked some of the rooms and eventually wandered into one labeled the "Arsenic Ward." It was empty, filled with more beakers and a large cabinet of files that had been left half-open. Samantha was becoming curiouser and curiouser about what was going on in this facility. The top folder was for Whitman. She stole that, opened the window, and crawled up to the roof via the fire escape. She walked over a few of the attached buildings, then down to the street, and sprinted the whole way home.

That night she read the folders, curled up with a teddy bear she'd found at Whitman's the night I stayed there. It apparently was his sister's or something. His file was totally filled out—it even had a date for his death almost a year later. Cause: arsenic poisoning. It gave a date for admittance into the mental hospital for a few weeks before then. For severe delusions and possible exhibition of multiple personality disorder. And it was signed by Dr. Filth.

In the morning, Samantha took the files to the police. As soon as she went in, the whole patrol room started to buzz. She overheard one officer say something about a "witness to another one of those weird kidnappings." Something weird was going on in Desolation Row, she knew as she was taken to an interrogation room. She clutched a pocketknife hidden in the front pocket of her jeans while the police commissioner came and asked some questions. The police gave her coffee and donuts, keeping her waiting to wait

until the mayor got there. They never told Samantha why, on the record.

Whitman tried to escape once while he was there. The Heart-Attack Machine wasn't put on quite tight enough. After about an hour of wearing it, the shocks had stopped wracking his body the way they normally did, and after another half-hour had stopped altogether. Stopping behind the machine and pretending to catch his breath, Whitman furiously worked his way through the straps and buckles, got it off and fucking ran for it. He knocked over that Hunchback of Notre Dame-looking mutant and made it to the gate, but knew that'd be too heavily guarded for an escape. But Whitman forgot about the telescopes. He heard all sorts of shouting from behind him as he looked for that cut in the fence. Three steps past the seventh window, he thought. He kept kicking at the fence, looking for his foot to catch on the gap he could slip through. The smell of kerosene got heavy in the air. Couldn't find the gap. Started getting dizzy. He went to climb but passed out.

His body kicked him awake as he was pulled down from the fence by goons with truncheons. They began to swing with heavy blows, the rubber landing with wet thuds across the back until one caught a rib and there was a sickening crack. Whitman stared up at one of those Nero skies; the moon was gone. One of the men hitting him looked familiar—most had masks, but one worked at the health insurance company my dad uses. We'd had to deal with him once. Whitman was sure it was him. Well, not sure. After that many blows to the head, he was never sure of what happened outside by the fences. God, they beat the shit out of him. He remembers it with the scars and chronic aches.

So this is the point where the story gets hard to tell. Samantha has insisted she doesn't know anything about it. Whitman's memory is so fucked up because of the Heart Attack Machine—and the small doses of arsenic fed to him in my ten days there—that he barely remembers the night Desolation Row came crashing down. But he swears Samantha was there. He swears he saw her, standing on the roof of a police car, the red SWAT bulletproof vest matching that stripe of hair.

All of the prisoners knew something was wrong before it began because the Hunchback panicked. He was a flighty creature, like a doe who'd had headphones playing heavy metal taped to his ears, always looking this way and that, fretting over the machine. And the superheroes and bowler hats showed up again. This time, they brought machine guns. What kind of

superhero needs a machine gun? But they fucking had them. They lined up next to the normal guards with the truncheons and argued and pointed fingers and pushed and shoved until a tiny old man in a white lab coat in came and started shouting at them.

One of the caped crusaders came into the cell, where all the nameless faces and Whitman had been waiting for the nightly session under the Heart-Attack Machine. He told the prisoners to stand up against the wall, shut up, and not move. Whitman groaned. His body hurt too much to move, even with the gun pointed at him. The guard shouted at him again. Whitman sighed and flipped him the bird. Part of him might honestly have wanted to die. Or maybe if he'd kept the gun on him, he'd have gotten up. Who knows how depraved and disconnected his sense of humanity was at that point.

Three of the shadows Whitman shared his cell with leapt at the guy. When they knocked him back towards the light, Whitman realized it was the man who'd arrested him, the man in the bowler. The gun went off; one shadow fell into the ground, blood trickling out of a chest wound. Bowler got dropped by two quick shades that tackled him and dragged him to the ground. They knocked him around pretty bad, until someone from outside of the cell shot one of the attackers. Whitman crawled along the floor and grabbed the automatic. He'd never even fired a gun, really. Well, once, when his redneck cousins took him out for hunting season, but that was quail and those don't fly much. It's hard to miss. Crawled over to where Bowler was laying and squeezed the trigger with the gun pointed at his stomach. You can fill in the rest.

The other prisoners spilled out into the hallway—Whitman didn't really know there were so many of them until they all went by. They went to look for Hunchback and all them, but he decided to get the hell out of the Factory. Crawling as fast as he could, he went over and hid behind that large machine, behind one of the gears. The sound was deafening but it was safe. It was dark enough where he couldn't be seen from anyone in the main area where more and more gunfire was erupting. The prisoners had taken more of the guns and were launching a counterattack.

After a few minutes of looking around the surroundings to make sure none of the freakish superheroes could sneak up on him, Whitman crawled up on to a cargo container. From there, he could look out of a window without being seen. It was dark and hard to see, but it looked like there was a large mass shifting, like the way an empty field sways in the dark with a midnight wind. Then the floodlights came on, illuminating the whole out-

side.

SWAT was everywhere. Like a fucking invading army, with people filing out of the armored cars every few seconds. Battering rams, guns, a firehose mounted on something that looked like the terrible offspring of a tank and a patrol car. Whitman tried the window, but it was shut tight and locked. He looked around for something to break it with, but there was nothing. And looking out, he realized he was too high to drop down, even if he could get the pane open. He put his ear to the window. Even over the clamor coming from inside the warehouse, there was this massive collective murmur. The police wanted into this building and were starting to get restless and impatient. Whitman could see someone with a lot of brass on his shoulders was shouting and pointed towards the building. Like someone pulling a brick from a damn, the army broke in a huge wave for the warehouses.

Whitman stayed hidden for a long time, just listening to gunfire and shouting, screaming. The flashes of breaching grenades would sometimes blind him and leave him seeing spots. But he refused to move for a long while. He tapped his foot to the beat of the machine guns and kept his head low.

When he heard the cops' voices rising above the violence, he sprinted out of his hiding spot, trying to get out of the warehouse as fast as possible. Flanking back around the Heart-Attack Machine, Whitman saw an open area of the warehouse and an open side door that let in the cool night air. He sprinted for it. And straight into a standoff. The superheroes had their guns pointed at the cops, the cops had their guns pointed at the superheroes but then he walked into the room and everyone had their guns pointed at him.

"Kill him!" These masked morons really wanted Whitman dead.

One of the cops lowered his gun slowly and said, "You're in the wrong place, my friend."

"You had better leave. Get the hell out of here." A sergeant was speaking. Whitman recognized him; he thought he'd played baseball with the sergeant's younger brother years ago. Whitman took a step backwards towards them.

One of the superheroes shouted, "Stay there!"

Fuck that. Whitman ran. They shot him in the back.

Was Samantha there? Yes, she was. Sometimes Whitman says he saw her. But she always denies it. She doesn't talk about it. Almost like the absence of words is the first step in not remembering. After Whitman went

down with that bullet in his shoulder, the cops just unloaded on the masked criminals. Samantha snuck back in a few days later, looking to see what had been going on in that twisted facility. There was blood everywhere over the smooth floors, like cheap paint for a haunted house. It was disgusting. One had taken a bullet in the aorta and he bled long after he was already dead.

They dragged Whitman past Samantha after they'd put him on the stretcher. His eyes were open and he stayed so silent, like he was already dead and just waiting for his body to realize it. But he winked at her. He doesn't remember it—somehow getting shot must have given him a sense of euphoria. The ambulance left. And Samantha walked home under the streetlights, talking to herself. She couldn't sleep for days afterwards. Silently, she swept her whole apartment and wrote three useless, rambling articles for the magazine. And she still had no idea what the hell was going on.

So, our story has almost come to a close. Just a few loose ends to wrap up, things that were found out long after the shooting in the warehouse. Johnny died. They shot him in the head sometime before Whitman's disappearance unraveled. Whitman wouldn't find out for years, not until I'd broken off my engagement with a girl he'd met after he returned to college. He found out after he moved back to Desolation Row.

The police sergeant who'd watched Whitman in the standoff called him into the precinct one day to talk about the whole incident. The organization was a think-tank that had mutated into some sort of cultish movement with a desire to control the world. It might have been the strangest thing Whitman had ever heard of on Desolation Row, and that was considering quite a lot.

The group had killed Johnny long before the raid. They'd stashed the body in the abandoned theater with the boarded up windows just behind Dr. Filth's office. Someone had propped Johnny up at the piano, dressed him in a costume of the Phantom of the Opera. A tape recorder left next to him had the voices of his executors on it. Johnny asked them why they were going to kill him in a tough, brave voice. Whitman almost cried when he heard their answer:

"Your friend Whitman, the regular Casanova, the one who's fucking that girl with the red hair, you know? (You can hear Johnny say, "Yes.") He saw some shit he shouldn't have seen. Took his pretty little girl up on the roof down on the docks. Looking for a good time, but dammit if this ain't gonna be the end of Casanova. But we're gonna kill him slowly. You've just got to

go."

The gunshot fires.

A girl's voice comes on. "Jesus, Tyler. What'd he do?"

"Just get outta here if you don't know. We've got to go down to the docks and tell the boss it's done. Call Dr. Filth too and tell him that the newest patient is on the Heart-Attack Machine tonight. Casanova is just being punished for going to Desolation Row."

Whitman thought it was his fault. And Samantha thought it was hers. She blamed herself enough where when she found out—two years before he would—she broke up with him. Said we were too different, there were things she just couldn't get over.

They hung Dr. Filth. In public. This town hadn't done that in almost a century, according to public records. Samantha took a picture and had it made into a postcard. She sent it to Whitman with the line "It's Finally Over." But he never responded. He didn't respond to any of my letters after she ended the relationship. Even when she checked up on how he was doing with school, no answers ever came. She didn't think he was getting them, but they were never returned to sender. He was even harder to keep track of after she moved away on work. She used to call mom's house and ask how he was doing.

The letters bothered Whitman. Once, he saw one in my mailbox and slammed his dorm door so hard the glass knob shattered into a million pieces, like a mirror dropped off a skyscraper. She always wanted to know how my life was. Whitman never could come out and say it, but it was worse without her in it. She told me in one letter she was writing a book about the events at the factory. Whitman never responded but burned the letter in a bonfire out in the woods after getting drunk with a bunch of people he'd never met prior to the party. He wasn't going to help her with a book. He hated himself for a lot it, angry at the whole world and all those lame people that fucked his life up. As a sort of peace offering, she offered to market it as fiction with changed names. He didn't have the heart to tell her that no one would believe it was true.

There's a happy ending to all of this. Whitman, eventually, got a degree from State, broke things off with his only other long-time relationship after she cheated on him. All in all, he probably needed some time alone before he came back home. There's no record of where he went after graduation or what he did. He might not even remember where he went. You have to be miserable to vanish without a trace, to do so much soul-searching that you

cease to exist to the outside world. Eventually, he got on a boat and sailed back to the docks. It was Nero season, but the weather wasn't bad. They came in to the usual fanfare, fishermen waving flowers at them from their skiffs and ships. He couldn't help but feel if Johnny was with him then, he'd have gotten so high that he'd have seen a friggin' mermaid.

Whitman received a letter forwarded to him from State the day he got back. From—well, if you don't know you haven't been paying much attention—Samantha. This one wasn't mailed from the same address as the other ones. It was mailed from the apartment she'd rented when they were dating, the one on Desolation Row.

He decided to go over, unannounced as all great romantics do. He rang the doorbell, tucked his head down so that when she looked through the peephole she couldn't recognize his face.

The door opened slowly, until his head rose and there was that moment of recognition before the door swung open and slammed into the wall. He grabbed her hand and spoke, in a slow tone that built like his entire life on Desolation Row, from naming to love to shooting. "You belong to me, I believe." That was his line, like he was straight out of a goddamn bad movie. They drove out to Carnival Hill, spent the night walking the docks and then went back to her apartment where she told him everything about her since he'd left. He told her everything about him since he'd left. Then, hesitantly, they talked about this place. Six months later, they married. Still together and happy. They'll be that way for a long time, I think. They bought a flat on Main, where if you look out the window, you can see the street sign he painted years ago, where the orange has faded but the name is still legible in the sun.

Yeah, everything is absolutely perfect. On Desolation Row.

Dion Berry

The Plagiarist

"You need to be here," Erika said. I looked up and caught her stern glare. I wasn't much in the mood for her holier-than-thou-can-ever-dream-to-be attitude. It was always my least favorite thing about her. Not only is it impossible to have a conversation with her when she gets like that, but it makes her look so unattractive. She stretches her neck, widens her eyes, and leans back in her chair; Jesus Christ, it makes her look like a turkey, a really arrogant turkey.

"I would never cheat, and I can't believe you're putting my reputation on the line by getting me mixed up in something like this," she said.

Erika and I were being accused of plagiarism. Dr. Mayton, our creative writing professor, had called us to her office to give us "one last chance to 'fess up." Two weeks before, our creative writing class (very uncreatively titled "Creative Writing") had received the assignment; write a true personal narrative, focus on scenes and imagery, page numbers, title, one inch margins.

"Dr. Mayton," I had said, "Suppose our narrative includes personal details about friends or family. Should we leave it out? Change names?" Erika shot me a turkey glare.

"Change the names," she answered. The last thing I was expecting to get out of Dr. Mayton was a straight answer. Typically, whenever anyone in the class has a question, she tells us how good of a question it is, repeats it with different words, and then tells us an anecdote about how hard it was growing up poor and black in New Orleans.

I decided to push my luck for more direct answers, but how far? Should I ask for a minimum word count for the assignment? Should I ask for tips to spice up my sex life? Should I ask for the faculty code for the library printers? I could print off a shit ton of documents and not worry about having to pay ten cents per page, fifteen cents for color pages. This may be my only chance to get the code. I couldn't let it pass me by.

"About how many words do you want?" I chickened out.

"That's a good question, Luke," she said. "You want to know how long I want your paper to be." I wanted so badly to scream no! I want to know the printer code so I can print off copies of Moby-Dick and sell them

out of my dorm room! Instead, I sat back in my chair as Dr. Mayton began telling the class about how a high school English teacher once gave her an assignment without a limit on the amount of pages she could write. Four minutes later, I started losing focus on her story, wondering how long the paint on the walls of the room had taken to turn the dull, lifeless shade of yellow it was now. The fluorescent lighting only made the color's death more obvious. It kind of made me sad, but I figured they could always paint over it and pretend it wouldn't die again. Then, my phone vibrated.

"You'd better not write anything about me, Luke." It was from Erika. I glanced her way, but her eyes were on Dr. Mayton, feigning interest in the ongoing tale. Erika and I fell in love the day we met three years ago. We didn't realize it until months later. When we finally started dating, her parents strongly objected to us as a couple. I was too poor for their daughter, they said. They tolerated my romantic presence in her life for four months before the pressure became too much for Erika. She left me on a Monday night in July.

"I'm not going to write about you. I've got something else in mind."

Buzz. "Good. I used to hate it when you wrote about me."

"I know, but all my best work was about you." She smiled when she got that one.

Buzz. "Haha. You're a good writer." I briefly turned my attention back to Dr. Mayton just in time to catch the term "acting white," and decided the second half of her story wouldn't be any more interesting than the first. I turned my attention back to texting.

"Do you find it the least bit ironic that this anecdote about a long personal narrative is so, you know, long?" She laughed as she read it, her brown hair uniformly swinging left to right, her eyes closing almost all the way.

Buzz. "Shut up. You love irony."

"I feel like I'm chewing on a sheet of paper," Chris said as she dropped her fork onto her plate. Consuming the cafeteria's brunch bacon was proving to be more of a challenge than normal. The large room was filled with the muttering of about three hundred students, at least half of them probably complaining about the food. "Try this and tell me it doesn't taste like paper."

"I don't eat pork," I said. "And neither should you."

"Please criticize everything I do," Chris said sarcastically. "Look at me. I'm drinking orange soda and eating bacon; one of us has to be the black

one in this relationship. Or else, we'll have to stop calling ourselves interracial."

"You know I'm an ethnic orphan, Chris," I said, pretending to be offended at her insensitivity. Her real name is Christina, but I've always liked calling girls by boy's names. Stereotypes represent order, so I go out of my way to flip them on their heads as often as possible, whether they be gender or racial. The first time I asked Christina if I could call her Chris, she asked if she could call me a homo. I liked that about her; she never stroked my ego.

"Oh, I'm sorry, baby," she said. "Should I come over later today and make you feel better?" She bit her lower lip and scooted closer to me in a semi-serious attempt at sexuality.

"No, you'd better not," I said, sincerely regretting having to tell her no. "Dr. Mayton assigned a personal narrative today, so I'm probably going to be working on that most of the night." Chris' face switched from sexual to questioning.

"What are you going to write about?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you?"

"No?"

"You always write about her." Chris read just about everything I wrote: poetry, short stories, journals, and even insignificant blog posts. It wasn't long before she noticed a common theme; Erika was in most of my writing.

"She's my best friend," I argued back.

"She's your ex." Chris had a point. I could only imagine what a jealous wreck I would be if I constantly had to read Chris playing mental games of tennis with an ex-boyfriend through her poetry, which I was already envious enough of, as it far outshined any of my writing. For this reason I sympathized with her but wasn't really in the mood to try and justify myself. I wasn't letting her guilt-trip me into giving up the one thing that allowed me to write nearly as well as she did. My arrogance wouldn't let me.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I don't feel anything for her anymore. I just use her for inspiration."

"You can't be inspired by something you don't care about." I was starting to regret dating a poet; she was too perceptive to confound with wordplay. "You never write about me; do I not inspire you?"

"I don't even understand why we're arguing about this; I probably won't even write about her."

"We both know you will."

"How can you know something that hasn't happened yet?"

"Don't speak to me like a child," she said, her hazel eyes filled with a seriousness I didn't see very often. "You can condescend to the other little bitches you hang out with all you want, but I would've thought you'd learned that shit doesn't work on me."

"Don't call my friends bitches," I said, and began to wonder when exactly we started fighting. "I'm not trying to condescend, but you're being irrational. I can write about whatever I want to write about and I don't need you guilt-tripping me about it just because you're insecure." Her stare softened and she breathed a deep and heavy breath, as if she were relieved that our argument had finally reached a hurtful climax on both sides and we could each now apologize and go back to being a happy couple. All that was left was to see who would apologize first.

"I know," she said, relenting and turning her face away from mine. "I'm sorry." I had forgotten one of the most important rules of arguing; the first person to apologize technically wins, because the next person feels like a dick. During the argument, both parties are allowed to behave like assholes because each is filled with a molten hot vindication of righteousness. Once one pops the apology cherry, the other can see their argument tactics for what they really were: unnecessary meanness.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry," I said, needing to outdo her apology in a last ditch effort to win the argument. "I really stepped out of line, but you know you have nothing to worry about when it comes to Erika and me. I'm completely dedicated to you."

"I know," Chris said, her voice sounding far away. I felt as if the words barely got to my ears. As if sensing this, she turned her face back towards me, wanting to make sure these next words had an easier time hitting their mark. "I just get nervous sometimes."

I kissed her, tasting more of her brown hair than her thin lips. "I love you."

"I love you too," she said. "Even if you do write about your ex fifty times every week."

I wondered if Nathaniel Hawthorne ever had to deal with a nagging wife continually questioning why he always wrote about secret sin. I could almost hear her over his shoulder asking, "Why do you keep writing about adultery? When are you going to write a simple, happy story? Are you finally going to shave that damn moustache tonight?" When will women learn that

they shouldn't try to control a man's art, or his facial hair? Men have no real control over these two aspects of our lives anyway; both grow however they choose, and although we can try to trim and shape them to a certain level of social acceptability, both are meant to be unique and somewhat uncomfortable. I guess a woman just wants to be able to kiss her man on the cheek, and snuggle up close under his chin without having to deal with the itchy, ever-present bothering of his beard, or his art.

"I didn't think it was important," Erika said, looking away in the same way she always did when she was lying. We were in her room, surrounded by movie posters and pink everything. Our carefree, in-class laughter from earlier in the day now seemed like it never even happened.

"That's not the point; you lied to me," I replied. I looked away from her and caught sight of a picture sitting in a frame on her desk. It was of the two of us before we were dating, back when things were easier.

"Look, it was none of your business in the first place. That's why I didn't tell you."

"You didn't tell me because you're a liar."

"Oh, please. You're acting like a child, Luke."

"You're acting like a child." I said, like a child. For all my make-believe confidence, Erika had always had the ability to make me feel inadequate, turning my well-articulated arguments into playground logic.

"Why are you reacting like this?" Erika asked. "You're being so mean."

"Because you deserve it!" I picked up the framed picture of us from her desk and threw it against the wall above her bed, taking pleasure in watching the pieces fall down onto her blanket.

Erika screamed. "You get the hell out of my room!"

A moment of silence passed. I swear, I felt something die. "Fine," I said, turning to leave. Even the most accomplished debaters know that nothing beats the good ol' fashioned throw-a-temper-tantrum-and-storm-out-of-the-room tactic.

I started writing that weekend. The assignment was due the following Monday. Chris had come over to study for a German exam. She was fluent in three languages: English, German, and French. She always told me that German was her favorite of the three because "I sound manic when I speak it, and 'manic' is in the word 'Germanic.'" The joke was stupid, and I teased

her about it every time she brought it up, but that didn't stop her from saying it. I suppose she liked giving me chances to make fun of her in the same way she so often made fun of me. It was one of the sweetest things a girl had ever done for me.

"Hey, in a few minutes, can you quiz me a little?" she asked, bouncing a little on the bed.

"I only speak uhmerican," I said in an exaggerated southern accent.

"So, you can make fun of the way white people talk, but I can't ask you to do some gardening around my plantation without it being a federal crime?"

"You're so cute when you're being racist." A little laugh bubbled out of her. I went back to typing. It was difficult to write with Chris in the room, but she was a welcome distraction.

"Can I read it soon?" She asked every fifteen minutes or so.

"Let me finish this paragraph," I finally said. Excitedly, she closed her books, eager for a break from studying, or eager to read my writing. The paragraph took about four minutes to finish. I constantly had to re-write whole sentences. I've never really been comfortable with editing one word at a time. I found it too risky to correct just one word without fully considering the entire sentence. I didn't just do this for assignments; it was commonplace in everything I wrote, even text messages. Easily misunderstood words lead to easily misunderstood sentences, which then lead to easily misunderstood meanings, which then lead to misunderstandings that aren't easily fixed.

I turned my laptop's screen toward Chris. She read aloud, commenting on things she liked or didn't like as she went along: good use of irony, interesting dialogue, unnecessary paragraphs, abuse of semi-colons, and the like. Coming to the end of the three and a half pages I had written so far, Chris leaned back against my wall, an expression of both relief and exhaust painted across her pale face.

"You OK?" I asked.

"I'm perfect," she replied. "Why didn't you write about Erika?"

"I didn't feel like it."

"This is like, the first time I've seen you write something that isn't about her."

"No, it's not." It really wasn't, but Chris tends to have a selective memory. I think she purposely forgets things, important things, things that cause our obnoxious play fights to become venomously real. She squinted at me, probably trying to decide whether or not to pursue the argument.

"Whatever you say, Luke," she said. There wasn't a hint of sarcasm to be found in her voice. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

Chris went back to her room to get dressed and shower; I was taking her out for a midnight picnic. We really aren't much of a going-out kind of couple, but this was a special occasion; it was Chris' birthday. I'd somehow managed to screw up her birthday the past two years. For her twentieth birthday, before we were technically dating, I waited until the last minute and never got around to getting her anything. On her twenty-first birthday, when we'd been together for nearly a year, I tried to give her a mix CD made up of songs I knew she'd love, but the CD became corrupted somewhere between my dorm room and hers. I was determined to make this year count.

***

"Where are you off to?" Erika said. She broke that silence that had hung in the room ever since she walked in, about an hour after Chris had left.

"I'm going to the park with Chris," I replied without looking up from my ironing board. "We're having a midnight picnic thing." Saying it to Erika, the idea didn't seem as fun as it had a few minutes ago; it seemed stupid, not good enough.

"That sounds like fun."

"Does it?"

"Don't be like that, Luke. I'm trying to apologize."

"You haven't even said the word 'sorry.' Just how are you trying to apologize?"

"Maybe it'd be easier if you'd admit you were being an asshole!" Erika rarely swore.

"Why don't you just admit that you're a shitty friend?" I fired back. Something about arguing with her always made me feel childish.

"I never attacked you about Chris, so why are you acting like this?" she asked. I wanted to be honest. I wanted to say that our breakup hurt me so badly, I didn't feel as if she had the right to be happy with anyone else. I wanted to tell her that she broke my heart when she promised she wouldn't, and because of that, she should have to be alone for the rest of her life, her punishment: seeing me fall in love with Chris. I needed my best friend to know that I wanted her to hurt as badly as I did the night she left me. I didn't tell her any of those things. I just remembered them all and wrote them down later.

"Just leave." I said.

"I'm not like you, Luke. I'm not going to walk away from our friend-

ship just because things got a little difficult. I didn't do it two years ago and I'm not going to do it now."

I grabbed my keys and my semi-ironed clothes. Leaving Erika alone in my room, I went downstairs to change in the public restroom.

***

An hour later, I was waiting for Chris by the fountain. Patricia, our school's womanly mascot, stood in the center of the fountain, happily pouring cold water from a bottomless vase into the bubbling pool below. I don't know much about Patricia except what is listed on the plaque in front of the fountain, that she's made of copper and was donated to the university in the 1900's. Still, I had to admire her dedication. I'd been attending the university for three years and she'd never once stopped pouring that water from the vase. I would've given up a long time ago. It was an odd thing in which to find inspiration, but as long as I never told anybody, I figured I could be inspired by whatever I wanted.

"I look pretty tonight, don't I?" a female voice asked. I blinked twice quickly.

"Patricia?" I asked.

"No, you dumb bitch. It's me." The voice came from behind. I turned around to see Chris.

"You're so sweet," I said. She was wrapped up in two scarves, a heavy jacket, a sweater, gloves, and a toboggan, or beanie, or skull cap; I can't remember which word we're supposed to use in the south.

We kissed and I took her hand, leading her off-campus toward Henway Park. The stars were out that night, but I ignored them; the lights from the skyscrapers downtown provided a much prettier sight. I was never much of a transcendentalist. I can find beauty in nature just as easily as anyone else can, but I prefer searching for the beauties human beings have created: music, literature, architecture, taxidermy, tight-rope walking, corn field maze designing, and every other craft that anyone has ever deemed an art.

Chris picked out a nice spot for us to settle down once we got to the park. It was just off the bike path under a covering of low-hanging branches, the kind of place where every rustle in the thick woods less than ten feet away can produce mild panic attacks, if you let them. We sat down and began to dig into the picnic basket, which was filled with honey buns, candy bars, and small bags of potato chips. The picnic itself was my idea, but filling the basket with vending machine snacks was Chris'. She said she didn't want me to spend too much money on her.

"A toast," I announced, raising my unopened bottle of Mountain Dew. Chris giggled and lifted her bottle of green tea to match the level of my much unhealthier beverage.

"And what are we toasting to?" she asked, smiling.

"A toast to your birthday. A toast to all the birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays passed. A toast to all the ones in the future. A toast to finding love, and a toast to never losing it."

We touched bottles, plastic on plastic. Chris took a sip of her green tea, somehow smiling as she did it. "I can't believe it's this chilly out, even for December ," she said. "You know, I wouldn't mind that global warming thing getting worse right about now."

"Marry me."

"What?"

"Marry me."

"No." A new expression spread over Chris' face. Her eyes squinted, her head shook slowly, and her mouth hung open slightly. I couldn't quite put my finger on the emotion she was feeling, but it looked a lot like disgust.

"Why not?" I asked.

"We're too young," she replied. "I don't even know where I'm going to live after graduation and neither do you."

"Wherever we live, we can live together," I countered.

"You're being ridiculous."

"I love you."

"I love you too, but we just can't right now," she said, sounding desperate to explain it to me in a way I could understand. When she saw by my expression that I wasn't relenting, she tried a different tactic, going on the attack. "I can't believe you would ask me that question without talking about it first."

"Proposals are supposed to be surprising."

"But we've never even talked about getting married."

"We're in love. What else is there to talk about?"

"I can't talk to you when you get like this." With that, Chris stood up, grabbed her drink, and straightened out her jacket. "Can we deal with this tomorrow?" She didn't wait for an answer, turning and leaving the little shade of branches she'd sought out for us. I quickly gathered up the picnic supplies, following her closely enough to make sure she wasn't mugged or kidnapped, but far enough away to give her space.

When I got back to my room, my clothes practically fell off of me.

The shower was a welcome change from the cold weather. I thought about Chris. I loved her. I thought about Erika. I hated her. I thought about Myself, but realized I didn't know enough about him to make an informed judgment.

I noticed an envelope on my desk when I got out of the shower. My name was scribbled on the front with an orange sharpie. The 'L' slanted slightly to the right and the 'k' was smaller than the 'e'; it was Erika's handwriting. Trembling from the cold or the confusion, I opened the letter.

Dear Luke,

Through all that we've been through, I've always been happy to say that I respect you and love you as a best friend. Tonight, I lost that respect.

-Erika

I ripped the letter into little pieces and tossed them on the floor. When I walked, they stuck to the bottom of my still-wet feet, like leeches. Climbing into bed, I turned on my laptop and opened my word processor.

"*You* need to be here," Erika said. I looked up and caught her stern glare, filled with self-righteous pretense. Dr. Mayton walked into her messy office, her wide eyes staring a hole through Erika and I. "How are you guys doing today?" she asked, a rhetorical question no doubt.

"I didn't plagiarize," Erika said quickly. I remained silent.

"You both wrote about the exact same thing," Dr. Mayton said shaking her head as she looked back and forth at copies of both of our papers. "A boy getting pissed when his ex-girlfriend gets a new boyfriend. You use most of the same scenes, themes, and imagery."

I felt Erika staring at me, a soft stare, the first one in days. She turned her turkey glare on Dr. Mayton now. "Maybe we've just had experiences in common."

"Have you?" she asked.

Maybe neither Erika nor myself wanted to admit it in front of the other, but we still were more similar than we'd like to be. We looked at each other, passing wordless treaties back and forth, almost apologies.

"Yes, we have." I answered.

Dr. Mayton sat back silently, her stare shifting from Erika to myself. "I'll give you guys both half an hour to write me a letter explaining yourselves. Luke, you go out in the hall. Erika, you stay here." Dr. Mayton handed me a sheet of paper and I stood up to leave, glancing at Erika one last time. She mouthed something to me, but I didn't catch it.

In the hall, I took out my phone and sent a text to Chris. "Do you mind if I come over later?"

Buzz. "You're not going to propose again, are you?" Chris is the only person I know who can successfully convey sarcasm through a text. Two days after the proposal, things had been slowly getting back on track for her and I, with only this new little inside joke as proof that the proposal ever happened.

"No, this diamond engagement ring in my pocket is for someone else."

Buzz. "Get your ass over here, you adorkable little thing. And no, that wasn't a typo." I put away my phone, sat down on the floor outside Dr. Mayton's office, and began to write. Out the window at the end of the hall, Patricia continued pouring water out of her vase. I briefly marveled at her tenacity.

Dear Dr. Mayton,

We human beings can only create so much. Our minds are limited by a lot of different factors: age, gender, race, class, and social conditions, to name a few. Therefore, I've always found it important to pay close attention to things that we do somehow manage to accomplish. Some people find beauty in nature, but nature is unlimited; where's the challenge, the thrill? I find beauty in humanity, in the symphonies we compose and the books we write, in the things we say and in the ways we treat each other. Admittedly, we can only create through our influences in the natural world, but that is where the true triumph of art lies. Everything I see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, I soak it up, arrange it to the best of my ability, and spit it back to you on a Microsoft Word document, Times New Roman font, page numbers, title, one-inch margins. Today, you have accused me of stealing someone else's work. I will readily admit to stealing Erika's work, and yours, and Patricia's, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's, and the work of every little light on every tall building downtown. I confess; throw the book at me.

-The Plagiarist

Breanna Stallings

My Man on the Bus

There's a man in the same seat of the bus every morning. Always by the window, solemnly he sits, hands crossed, in his subtle place three rows from the entrance. A larger man, he wears a pressed navy suit and a cream tie with red diagonal stripes. His hair, a dark, creamy color of espresso is always pressed neatly to his head, the tiny tracks still visible from his comb. Stiffly, he rides alone for seven minutes each way, to and from work. I sit in the subway and wait for the 7:50 and the 4:25 bus to come every day.

What little change I collect through the day, I use to ride those buses. Some people take a dollar and a quarter for granted, like it is chump change rather than a full day's work for me. I remember, I used to buy sodas from the rickety machine in the alley for seventy-five cents and slowly sip them just to feel the rush of the cold sugar against my teeth and the sprout of carbonation down my throat. The days of that are over now, though. I haven't tasted a soda in months and now I just have to resort to drinking water from the rusted machine at the bottom of the bus station stairs. Sometimes, the bittersweet taste of the water gets stuck in the back of my throat and the taste of metal lingers on my tongue.

I ride with him every day, but I don't think he has taken notice. I am quiet about my entrance, and though sometimes, at the sight of me, elderly women hold their purses and their grand-children closer, usually, I go un-announced. I always sit seven rows back from him, an inconspicuous spot in-between the darkened back of the bus and the emergency exit.

Mostly, I do this to waste time. Bus 23 is the best for people watching, because at 7:50 in the morning it contains a wide array of riders: from street-walkers with smeared mascara-caked eyes and greasy, matted hair coming in off the night shift, to business execs hustling together, sifting papers in a hurried rush, to the PS 34-46 school kids sulking in, groggily doing homework on the way to school, too late to catch the school bus. At 4:25, though, it is different. People feel more relaxed, I see the high schoolers taking a social trip to the mall. I see the business people, more spread apart this time, ties loosened and ready to go home.

I see the prostitutes again, fresh, powdered and on a new high with large expectations for what the twilight will hold for business opportunities. Everyone, despite physical appearance, seems to glow in the mid-afternoon sun and acknowledging that the day's worries are behind them, bask in the peaceful warm rays.

I'm not sure why I follow this man so often, but something about him intrigues me. Despite his business attire, he never becomes one of those huddled suit-and-tie clones that shuffle papers and sweat each minute that could potentially make them late to the next board meeting. No, he sits alone, his feet slightly turned in, self-consciously aware of the way his sides hang over into the next seat. Typically, he rides with his head close to the grimy glass, almost like a child, expecting something new and exciting to show itself. Sometimes, though, he pulls out something small from his wallet. He tries to delicately hold it with his large hands and from where I'm sitting, I can see his back tense up and wrinkles forming themselves in his blazer. I am always too scared to go see, because then someone might notice me being odd. But that intrigue keeps me in this seat, every day, and myself, just like a child, and just like himself, I watch him and wait for something new and exciting to show itself.

A few weeks later, it is Tuesday, and I'm getting onto the 4:25 bus. I climb up the bus stairs and notice there is a large number of high-school aged children on here today, and the bus is unusually crowded. There are three seats open, one in the front, directly behind my man, and in the very back. Panicking, I can't decide if I want to sit so far away from him I can't see him, or be almost too close for comfort? What if he notices me? But if I sit up front, or in the very back, I will have wasted this dollar and quarter that I had to beg of so many people. Suddenly, people are pushing frantically behind me to try to claim seats, and quickly my options slim and the only seat left is the one behind him.

I walk somberly past him, head hung low, trying to be discreet. I slide into the seat behind him and pretend to look out the window at passing pedestrians. It is unusually rainy and cold for this time of year and I can breathe on the panes of the glass and watch small ringlets of condensation form. For two minutes, I occupy myself by seeming busy in my own mind and covert to the rest of the world. The bus' wheels creak and slowly, we start our way "home".

After another minute has passed, I allow myself to look at him, to study him. I relax in my seat and glance casually forward. His dark brown hair has some small gray streaks and I can see where he has chosen not to iron his pants today. I see his back tense as usual, and I notice, in front of his bulk, like he is holding a tiny beating heart with the gentlest hands, he has a small, wallet-size portrait.

Suddenly, the bus hits a puddle and hydroplanes for a moment, causing the back half to run onto the curve. People scream and the lights on the bus flicker and go out. People are panicky, business men trying to pick up small receipt papers that decorate the floor like huge, crumpled snowflakes, a mother who tries to maneuver holding her baby and picking up his pacifier that bounced into the next seat. Slowly, calm re-enforces and people, though a bit disarrayed, claim their seats again.

"Is er'body alright back there?", a husky voice dressed in a oversized blazer and backwards hat says from the front of the bus. People give thumbs-ups and murmured "okay"s and "fine"s. The bus' brakes squeal as the shocks release, coming back down off the curb, and something slides into my foot.

Bending down, I feel something small and square, thick and torn around the edges. Slowly, I pick it up and notice that it is a wallet. I glance around casually and running the base of my palm over its smooth, worn brown leather. I pick at the small frays at the edges and white wisps of thread reveal themselves. I don't want people to notice, so I hunch over and keep the wallet buried in between the "V" that forms in the saggy part of my jeans and the faded gray seat beneath me. I open the wallet, trying to identify to whom it belongs. Open a flap, I can see a small picture, the same small picture my man is holding.

I can identify him, maybe fifteen or so years ago, about thirty pounds lighter, no sign of gray hair, and a proud smile on his face. But there are three others in this picture, a woman, and two children. She is beautiful, blonde and in a summery cotton dress that emphasizes her sun-dipped freckles that spot her cheeks and shoulders. The children, they seem to be interacting with one another rather than focusing on the camera. Their gap-tooth smiles and small wispy hairs seems to come alive in the expressions of laughter on their faces. They nudge at each other playfully, and betwixt a moment of glee, this picture was taken. There is a orange-

stained sunset behind them, and their toes are sprinkled in white sand. I can almost hear those blue-black waves beat against the shore with their heaving bodies.

"He takin' your wallet, man", one of the prostitutes says in a loud, gum-smacking over enunciated tone. Getting no response, she sticks her leg out and nudges the navy suit of my man with her boot, leaving a small, muddy streak. He looks up at her, confused.

"I said, he is takin' your wallet! Look!" She points at me with a long acrylic nail and slowly, my man follows the arrow of her arm to my face. My heart begins to pump and I can feel my cheeks redden with warm blood rushing underneath them.

"Look! See! Look! He got it in his crotch!" Another accusatory point. He turns to me and looks down at my hands, which have not moved, and stares at his unfolded wallet and the exposed family portrait.

"Can I have that back?" He says. They are the first words I've ever heard him speak and his voice seems miniscule in comparison to his body. Each word pierces the tense air and hits me in the face with the force of a needle begin sew through a piece of fabric, over and over again, rhythmic and stabbing.

"Yeah. Sorry. I wasn't…I promise. I swear I wasn't doin' anything. Nothin' wrong". I hang my head and hand the still-open wallet to him. He half-way turns in his seat, his profile to me, and with the wallet in his hand above the seat, he strokes the picture, softly, slowly.

"They're my life, you know? Everything. Thank you."

The bus' brakes hiss and it slows, coming to a halt in front of his neighborhood. He nods twice, once to the prostitute, and once to me, a long-drawn out expression of simple gratitude. He stands, smoothes his pants, folds his wallet, and places it in his pocket.

As he exits the bus, I longed to say, "I understand. They are my life, too". And a melancholy wave of realization hits me that my time with him his done, now that he knows my face and will notice I daily ride the bus to nowhere. I wanted to tell him, "Wait! What will I do now? Who will I watch? Who will I love?" But by the time the words gathered themselves behind my teeth, he was tapping down the stairs, onto the pavement, and slowly his back became another dot in the crowd.

Nonfiction

Sarah Schoenhals

After a Year Abroad: Reflection on a Traveler's Best Moments

It felt noble, in a way, yet liberatingly inconsequential at the same time. Sitting all alone on street corners with my life on back, I knew that the girl I was when I'd left America was nowhere to be found. I first left my life here to go to England for 9 months and study at the prestigious Oxford University, and "see the world." I knew, the moment I stepped off of the plane, that the mysteries to come would change me forever. It wasn't until I fully fell in to the realities of my new existence, though, that I began understand how much it really meant. What started as a thirst for knowledge inside the academic circles of Oxford, quickly became a much more significant, rootless quest of self-discovery - an adventure that extended far beyond the castle-like walls of that university, or anything I could've imagined.

I found myself soaked in solitude, drifting in and out of reality, never finding a sure foot to step down on. There I was, traveling through foreign countries, often alone, where I could disappear into thin air and not a soul would notice or care. But there is an incredible strength and nobility in that sort of freedom that nobody can touch. One learns to take it all on faith. I was given a story all my own, to write and experience as I went. It was something I wouldn't have wished on anyone, yet now I wouldn't trade it for the world.

With what felt like my whole life stuffed into a backpack, books in hand and music in my ears, my open heart and tickled soul found a new calling that year. I found myself on a buses, planes and trains, traveling through an infinite abyss, often sleeping in hostels or bus-stations, resting on sidewalks to take in my new surroundings, or simply wandering the streets of every new city with no sure place to go. I truly got see much of the world, from the French alps, the green hills of Northern Ireland, the Scottish Highlands, the depths of Paris, the cliffs of a Greek Island, all the way to the mountains of New Zealand and back to London streets. And after each excursion, Oxford was always beckoning with studies and celebrations. There was never certain aim or purpose, but there was always brilliance.

At times I would close my eyes and pretend that I was home again, safely. Or that my very own "Edward Cullen" was coming to hold me tight and protect me from any fear or harm that could befall me. Tears often soaked my cheeks, a weary traveler on a very long journey, never seeming to find a resting place. But with each new day, each new place, and each fresh step.

I was thrilled and astonished at the adventures that were awaiting me. I traveled through country after country, seeing new face after face, learning about different lives and hearing different stories. I never found familiarity but always found comfort in the thrill of seeing the world each day with new eyes, as a wildly free traveler.

This journey was never about the cathedrals or bridges or landscapes. The most incredibly beauty I found lay not in the sights, but in the roaming often with no where to go and no one to see, and realizing that, in truth, I had everywhere to go. I was able to learn what it meant to "live in the now." Moments that took my breath away were in that delicious glory of wandering freely, of surging forward through new surroundings, and knowing I could let the air of these new places kiss my face, and that they would bring to me fresh wisdom and adventure all their own. Those were the times I realized I was a true wanderer, and the moments I knew I would never be the same. I discovered that it wasn't about being well-traveled, but about being well-filled with soul, freedom and spirit.

Words cannot give credit to the brilliance of what I experienced abroad and, while I am happy to be back now, I know that my heart and soul will always have an ache for the incredible journey I left behind. Sometimes, when the right song comes on, I close my eyes and I am back there again, resting my head on the seat of a bus or walking wearily through city streets, and my soul is filled with the bliss of remembrance.

Now I am back to the comfort of familiar faces and love that I had missed so much while away. Even though Europe isn't calling my name anymore, I still find liberation in being back to a life I didn't want to leave behind in the first place, a life I really loved. I can step in to these years of my youth in stride, with an open heart and fulfilled soul, always remembering that all who wander are not lost.

Justin Lafreniere

Northbound

Today begins with an obnoxious alarm going off somewhere below my bed, on a little foldable table that stands out against the mess. It looks like the debris of what had once been a dorm room because it, in fact, had been just days before. I stumble out of bed, step on a book, swear, and throw clothes on. There is no reason that exams should be given before 9 a.m. unless it's that dream where you're late and didn't study and show up in your underwear. Nevertheless, I have an exam on the "Form and Theory of Poetry" at a time when the only meter that should be counted should be me composing sonnets with a harem of naked women in my dreams. And maybe I'd wonder why I was writing sonnets in that situation, but it's a dream so I just go with it. I walk through the cold of a December morning, looking up at the downy grey sky, knowing the puffy clouds are bringing snow. And soon.

After two hours of writing about significance of lineation and how the evolutionary nature of enjambment and why sonnets are an organic poetic form, I walk out of the room already—or perhaps still—tired and not wanting to drive the six hours home to Fairfax, Virginia.

Standing outside of the parking deck, preparing to head back inside, snow begins to fall. It is two hours earlier than I had anticipated; the shift in the weather will make me leave before I can go through the normal luxuries of a morning shower and cleaning the room before the trip. Above all else, I know I have to drive faster than this winter storm as it works its way up the coast.

The car—a 1993 teal Mustang—is already packed, so the only thing to do is check the room, grab the necessary small items like my wallet, my keys, my glasses, and a backpack. Alison, my girlfriend and traveling companion, is just waking up when I go to get her. We have to move some more of her stuff from the room she is moving out of to the temporary storage in my room. Her bedding, clothes, books, posters and pictures litter my floor already. We arrange everything as best we can, which is like trying to have two clowns piece together the Colossus of Rhodes in a matchbox. Eventually, we strew some of the junk about the

floor and we head for the car, ready for six hours of interstate, passing cars, and flurries.

Ali, as she always does on the trips back home, begins to feel carsick. With spirituals sung by her high school choir playing loudly in the car, she falls asleep in one of the traditional but horrendously uncomfortable napping positions that the front seat of a car offers. I keep singing and we pass Greensboro, quickly coming up on Mebane. It is now past noon and the storm is well behind us. Everything is going according to plan, according to mundane and simple plan. The car is on cruise control and rolling smoothly, heading at a clip of 65 miles per hour that feels much better than when the car tries to muscle through the narrow Charlotte streets.

We are passing signs for the I-85 and I-40 split, heading uphill on a banking curve. The clouds are the color of the concrete, that light and sort of calm grey. God I hope we don't get caught in that storm. I check the rearview, then the speedometer. Heading a little fast, I turn the cruise control down. The car slows, trying to find the desired speed. Looking back to the road, I watch a few cars shoot by on the left, notice the insignificance of the name on the back of a rumbling 18-wheeler. Something lurches on the underbelly of the car and the green beast of an automobile speeds up again, trying to climb the gradual incline of the interstate. Tapping my breaks, the car slows again.

The cruise control must be jammed or broken. I've never done a long trip without cruise control and suddenly the prospect of driving without it seems terrible, my ankle strained from manipulating the throttle. I try to turn the cruise control back on, but the car is willing itself forwards. The speedometer's needle is kissing 80 and pushing for higher and I look into the rearview and there are flashing lights mounted on monstrous SUVs running up behind me. I put on my turn signal and move towards the shoulder but the cops keep on going, so quick that they're down the hill and out of sight before I even hit the rumble strips. This car needs to stop. My foot pushes on the brake as hard as it can, the car fighting against the will to stop, like it only wanted to go on forever and ever until it ran out of gas and stopped forever, dead and willing to let its body be covered in kudzu and shaded by the trees. The speed finally starts to drop, quick and then slower. The evil inside the engine

is still fighting, intensely willed for an inanimate machine. When the speedometer falls near the five mile per hour mark, I shut off the engine and throw it in park in one motion.

I am shaking. I am staring at a road sign that says the interstate will go down to one lane in a mile. I am mostly shaking because my eyes can't focus enough to stare and track the flashing lights.

Ali is awake now. She leans forward and turns toward me. "What's wrong?"

"The…the, uh," The words just don't want to come out. "The brakes aren't working. Or. I couldn't stop accelerating." My hands are still clinging to the rubber of the steering wheel. I am sweating even though the air is growing colder without the car's heat on. Shit. I'm breathing so fast that it's hard to keep breathing and yet hard to slow down.

"Hey. It's okay. The car is stopped." Ali's hand on my arm makes me jump. Okay. Time to calm down and figure this out. I grab my phone and call my parents. I tell them what is going on. My father, the man who thinks he could have fixed the Hindenburg if only he was on it and had a roll of duct tape, gives me a list of useless instructions. Turn the car back on; the RPM gauge shoots up like the car was traveling almost 100 miles per hour. Can I drive down to exit 170 and my aunt's house in Durham? Seriously? I just barely managed to stop a runaway vehicle. Is the check engine light on? If it was on then I wouldn't have almost died fiddling with the fucking cruise control. What happens if you stomp on the gas pedal? It'll probably fucking explode. I kick at the gas pedal. It just dangles towards the floorboards. All the tension has gone out of it, like the throttle line had snapped. It feels like the body hanging from the end of the noose. Sickeningly limp. I take down the number for the roadside assistance program for AARP and hang up without saying goodbye.

Outside my window, cars are beginning to pile up in the far left lane. A few cars shoot down the lane that plans to close soon. I call AARP. The usual automated messages that remind you that you should call 911 instead of AARP in case of a serious accident (in case you forgot) plays and then a human's voice says "Hello" with a drawl thicker than any I'd heard since I'd been in Alabama for a part of the summer.

"Hi. My car broke down and I need a tow."

"What's the problem with the car?"

"It cannot stop accelerating."

"Um. Okay. Sir, is the car stopped at the moment?"

No, it's actually flying Dukes of Hazard style through the air over a moat full of crocodiles and huge dinosaurs wearing cheap sunglasses. "Yes ma'am."

"Ok. Let's figure out where you are. Do you know what street you're on?"

I explain that I'm on I-85 just after the I-40 split, heading northbound towards Durham. The woman asks for the closest exit number or mile marker. I look for one, but the huge construction warning obstructs my view. I get out, short-sleeved, and walk down about 100 feet. "I don't see one." More cars are piling up into a stagnant line on the road. There must be an accident up ahead where the other lane closes. I-85 northbound is shutting down.

The woman can't find where I-85 and I-40 split. "Sorry, hon. I'm in Texas and trying to follow this road on Mapquest but I can't seem find that junction. Can you walk out and find me the nearest mile-marker?" I tell her I can and start walking down the side of the interstate.

Some of the cars driven by the most impatient and idiotic people are beginning to make U-turns, heading the wrong way on the shoulder. I'm glad my car is covered by the construction sign so one of them won't hit it, but as I leave Ali in the car I'm filled with fear that someone will clip the Mustang. But I have to find the mile-marker or next exit number, otherwise we'll be on the road for a long time. It is cold and every few hundred feet, someone leans out of the window to ask me what's going on. I am walking towards the accident, I am at the almost exact distance away from the accident they are. Unless I feel a disturbance in the Force, my answers are no better than the ones they can hypothesize in their own heads.

After ten minutes of walking, I realize I should have gone the other way, walked towards the last mile-marker I passed. Not because it would be more helpful for this lady in Texas—who waits in patient, encouraging silence on the phone—to find me. But because it was probably a hell of a lot closer. More police cars roll down on the right shoul-

der, followed by two ambulances. I hope the people in the accident are okay; I at least managed to bring my vehicle to a desired stop, instead of a forced collision leading to a painful halt.

"I'm sorry this is taking so long." The phone is getting harder to hold. My fingers are changing colors, turning red as the brake lights that line the interstate.

"It's okay, sweetie. As long as you're safe. We're gonna try and get you out of there as soon as possible."

I keep walking, faster now. My windbreaker pants feel thinner than usual in the weather. My feet clomp heavily downhill and I try to ignore more questioning drivers. Then I see the it. "Ma'am, we're before mile-marker 116."

The operator says, "Okay. Give me a second." I begin the trek back. Now, as the cars have stopped, begun turning around in some instances, begun doing ridiculous things like driving down the right shoulder or through the grass, I get asked even more frequently if I know what happened. "Okay, I found you. Can you hold while I call the towing company?"

"Yes ma'am." Keep on moving. It's warmer if you keep moving. But as I come closer to the car, I also realize that those goose-feather clouds have been getting closer and closer. Any ground we had gained on the storm is quickly being eaten up by the breakdown. As the woman comes back on the line, the Mustang comes into view. It's still in one piece.

"Sir, the problem is, well, I called the towing company and he said that even if he went out to get you, he'd be sitting in the same traffic you are. So what he suggests we do is have you call back in an hour. I'll leave all your information here and they'll be able to find you really quick. So call back at 3:25, okay?"

Fuck. "Okay. Yeah. I'll do that. Thank you so much for all your help." I get in the Mustang. Ali has curled up with a black wool blanket. I explain the situation to her. The sigh could have thrown out her back and it gets the full eye-roll accompaniment. I begin to apologize, but she shakes her head. I put my temples to the cool of the steering wheel. When I've managed to compose myself enough to raise my head, I see a white pickup pull up next to Ali and I.

"You out of gas?" The man might be considered a redneck by one who doesn't know all the varied classifications of southerners.

"No sir, accelerator broke." At my response, the man looks perplexed, then tips his cap and drives off slowly. With the truck out of the way, I have a clearer view of the roadway and the sky. It has begun to snow.

Almost an hour passes. It is dominated by a fight with my parents over the inability to get the car fixed immediately, my previously shrewd behavior on the phone, and what time we would get in now. From Durham, it would be at least another four hours. What had started as a plan to be in by about four p.m. has turned into seven p.m. at the absolute earliest. The snow has not begun to stick and only comes intermittently.

I call back the roadside assistance program. After going through all of the automated red-tape, I am transferred to a different operator than the woman I had before. Luckily, the information about my location has been saved, so I can avoid walking through the cold to find the mile-marker once more. And avoid the stupid questions of the other motorists. The tow is sent for; it will take another forty-five minutes to reach us. Traffic, however, has begun to move. Slowly, inconsistently, like an old man shuffling towards the bathroom. But it is progress. Ali and I go back to talking about exams and her moving and anything that will keep us from focusing on how long it takes. At exactly forty-five minutes from the end of my call, the tow truck arrives. According to the stereotypical catalog of southerners, the wrecker operator is "typical." He gets out with a brown beaten hat, a plaid vest, and a cigarette already in his mouth. He is Jeff Foxworthy's career, manifested.

I hand him the keys and he tries to start car. It roars and the engine wants so baldy to race forward against the parking brake. He looks perplexed, shuts off the car. Attaching chains to the car, he hits a lever and the wench halls it up on the flatbed, creaking as it goes. On top of the wrecker, it looks strangely pathetic and yet majestic, as if it was some trophy to be carted away by the victor of a weird contest. I get into the truck and help Ali up. Rumbling down the interstate again, I watch the trees, the sky. The snow has begun to stick and come down with modest volume. The trucker is silent. Ali and I are silent. We take

the first exit we come to, pull into a gravel lot. They lower the car and Ali and I head into the office of the shop.

It is blissfully warm. I took a seat on an empty bench, looking around the room. It was obviously a sort of mom-and-pop mechanic shop. After a few minutes of silence, an older woman with a motherly voice asked Ali if she needed anything. Before an answer came, a man of about the same age handed her a coat.

"It's time for lunch, dear." His voice was gentle, chivalrous. He put on his own coat, brown except for a few grease stains. Looking towards me, he said, "Your car will be done in a hurry. Where are y'all headed?" I explained that we were headed home but had got caught in the traffic accident. "Yessir. That was a bad one. We couldn't have gotten to y'all. Hell, he," The man pointed towards the shop area where the mechanic was walking around the Mustang. "He took an hour and a half to get back from lunch. Terrible."

"Speaking of lunch, are you two hungry, would you like something to eat?" The old woman's eyes were so sincere, lighting up. Ali and I looked at each other incredulously. Raised in Northern Virginia, "southern hospitality" was more punch line than practice. Going to school in Charlotte, while sometimes showing the idea in action, was still far from proof that Southerners were legitimately friendlier than other people of other regions. But to offer to pick up lunch for a customer? Ali and I kindly declined. In general disbelief. But declined nonetheless.

Ten minutes after the older couple left, the mechanic came in. "All fixed. Your throttle was clogged. Clean it out in another 30,000 miles with Sea Foam or something like that. You'll be fine." He handed me back the keys. The repair cost thirty dollars and took less than that in minutes. Ali and I walked back to the car, drove down the gravel way back to the main road, and got back on the interstate. The storm had caught us but we were finally moving again. The car drove smoother than it had since I'd got it and raced towards the Virginia state line. The traffic from the accident had cleared and, although there were spots off the road where the snow was clumping in white layers, it hadn't stuck to the road. The storm was beautiful too, that winter serenity that made

me wonder why I'd avoided it for so long. And then I thought about how I was driving a sixteen year old muscle car with awkwardly tiny tire. They were too circular to be car tires, smaller and unnatural looking.

As we cross into the Old Dominion, the snow tapers off. Slowly, sweetly, like Jack Frost was a kind fellow who just wanted to pretty up the place and then leave it alone. We get to talking about how simple the car repair was. A clogged throttle. Thirty minute fix after a two hour delay. I tell her how much better the car drives, how it actually feels like it has some muscular power behind it. She points out that, despite all its muscle, the car is teal.

"It's a gay muscle car."

"It isn't gay. It may paint its nails and wax, but it isn't gay. It's a…it's a metro-sexual Vin Diesel, that's all."

Since the storm wasn't that impressive and neither Ali nor I had eaten since that morning, we decided to stop in South Hill for lunch. Hardy's? No. McDonalds? No. Burger King? Hell no. We pull in to the parking lot of a Wendy's. There was no snow, though the sky still looked like one big cloud, a threatening swathe sitting above us.

The place is nearly empty when we go in. A black woman slightly older than I am discusses how much she doesn't want to pick up her kids in this weather with a coworker. An older man who appears from behind one of the industrial refrigerators asks her what the alternative is. "Just leave him. He'll get home." She laughs, which is more of a terrible cackle. Not evil, but pitchy and loud.

"At least you're not gonna have to take the bus in this. I'm gonna freeze waiting on that thing." The old man walks back towards one of the storerooms, laughing. He stops to look out the window, walking closer and cocking his head, straining to look at the clouds above the building.

Ali and I order our food and while I'm paying, Ali goes to select a table. She chooses one in the middle of the room, decorated with an obviously fake daisy in a plastic vase. From the table, it is impossible to see out the building's high windows. They are covered by large, obscuring decals that promote hamburgers and fries and a "$.99 Frosty!" I go and fill my cup with coke and bring the food back to the table. As we're

eating, her a flattish hamburger and me some "Asian" boneless chicken that burns my esophagus with each bite. My intestines are already beginning to complain; ethnic food and fast food seldom mix into a favorable combination. As we are eating, a man in a heavy jacket comes walking in to the sounding of the obnoxious door-chimes that sounds like Christmas tree bells. His shoulders are covered in snow.

"I'm done." There are two pieces of chicken on my Styrofoam tray still. My stomach hurts. And it has begun to snow again. Ali takes another bite and packs her stuff neatly up before heading to the trash receptacle. I grab mine, toss it, and head outside.

There is a quarter-inch of snow everywhere. On all the cars, on the sidewalk; a dusting is collecting on the streets. Mixing with the black asphalt, it looks like the hide of a large and scaly Dalmatian. That sense of imperative that I had lost was rushing back into my head like I'd just stood up too fast. Pulling my hand into the sleeve of my jacket, I walked around the back of the car and brushed snow off the rear windshield, which was totally buried. Then I went to remove the snow from the front, looking for the windshield wipers that weren't quite big enough to brush the whole pane of glass. As soon as I sat in the car, I crank the defrosters, threw the car in reverse and head back for the interstate. South Hill is only three hours from home. We could still beat the worst of the storm, I think.

On the shoulders of I-95, piles of snow are collecting volume, growing like terrible blobs in the worst science fiction movie ever. They are growing and will invade the road, slide cars in to each other and take over the human race. Keanu Reeves will star in the film.

I am heading along at 60 miles per hour, while some cars race by going 70 or faster. The sky is still calm, other than the precipitation floating towards the ground. Even that is gentle, though it seems to stick more and more the further north we get. I imagine that if we can make it to Richmond before the bulk of the storm hits that everything will be fine. Richmond is a big city with lots of resources to keep the roads from collecting too much snow and icing over. From there, the areas were more developed, wealthy Northern Virginia counties that would have greater resources than any of the backwoods south of the capital. Ali puts music back on and watches the road with eyes steadier than mine as

we roll through Petersburg. She is from Massachusetts and this weather would be called "June" in her hometown. We laugh about how bad the entire city of Charlotte must be freaking out right now, how anyone who still left on campus is probably out dancing in the quad. This storm will probably paralyze the entire region of the South until the sun burns it off. Even if flurries continue to fall, not stick, just fall, the whole South will shut down.

When we get to Richmond, the storm has picked up. A lot. The snow is consistent, sticking with admirable determination to the roads. I roll down my window so that I can reach my arm out to brush away some of the snow that has collected on the few inches of glass where my windshield wipers don't reach. I look to the right and see a snowplow rolling under an overpass. It's blade is still up. The roads are unsalted. The sun has set and visibility is decreasing. Traffic, for a Friday, is light. With the coming storm, many of the would-be regulars have called in sick or left for home already. We should be home already.

As we near the VCU campus, the three lanes have vanished beneath the snow. Cars are moving along in an orderly patter. I pull in behind a gold Kia Sedona and sit, using his wake as a safe The skyscrapers of the Richmond skyline are mostly dark, making them more invisible behind the falling white veil. I have never had to drive in the snow before and I am getting increasingly nervous.

The car slips. It skids a little, shaking left and right like it has been pushed by a strong breeze. Ali yelps and I push the wheel instinctively, following the movement of the car. Then the wheels find enough dry road to regain traction and follow the movements of the steering wheel again.

"Are you okay?" Ali and I ask each other at the same time. It would be cute if it wasn't a question of injury or health.

"What do I do when that happens?" My hands are gripping the rubber of the steering wheel so tightly that they ache.

"Don't hit anything." She tries to smile, reaches a hand out to touch my shoulder. "You're fine."

The car slips again, just for a second, before straightening back out. We are less than halfway through Richmond, and somewhere I

know that. I keep looking for the Marlboro plant, with its white tower breaking the sky, the red stripe fading in the darkness. I will not see it for another hour, how long it takes to inch and crawl through Richmond. There are no road crews. There is no salt. There is nothing. Richmond has done nothing to prepare. What I cannot know is that I-85 moved along the snow line almost to the Carolina-Virginia border. When Ali and I got on to I-95, we moved directly into the storm's path.

All through Richmond, the car threatens to kick out into skids, to slid across the white road into the lane dividers. I am trying to focus on the road but I am exhausted and scared and things seem to be happening so slowly. It feels like we will never move past Richmond. But eventually, we do, to where I-95 northbound is flanked on both sides by rows of trees. Just a few miles past Richmond, we see a cop sitting on the side of the road.

"He isn't do anything. Useless."

Ali shakes her head. "Down in that ditch, under those trees, there was a minivan." The possibility of an accident feels more real now. My throat feels like it is about to close and I have to cough like I am trying to clear my throat, like I'm trying not to choke. It feels like when the dentist shoves a tool too far down your throat. My throat calms down and I keep driving. Rolling down the window, I brush more snow off the side of the windshield and keep rolling. The faster we make it home, the better off we'll be. Keep going.

I can't keep going. The gagging attack comes back twice and my breathing stops for a heartbeat and Ali's hand is on my shoulder and she is telling me to pull over and I do as carefully as I can and throw the car in park and open the door and vomit. It is the red of the Wendy's chicken and it burns my nose and esophagus as it comes back up. It manages to ache and burn at the same time, as another wave comes up. It burns. If I wasn't so scared, I might laugh. I am convinced I will die or that I will skid on a patch of ice and careen headlong into the woods and a branch will break Ali's fragile little neck, tossing her blond hair at an awkward angle. It is a paralyzing fear as I imagine complete blackness, then eternal life. Once my friend asked me if I could imagine living forever and I realized how much more frightening heaven is than oblivion. But I am afraid of death and afraid of never hearing Ali again. It is not her touch,

her kiss, her face that I will miss most. It is the voice, her ability to respond to my love.

For a few minutes, we sit there. Ali calls my parents and tells them I'm throwing up on the side of I-95 in a snowstorm. After I pull myself back into the car and close my door, she hands me the phone. My dad is talking about something useless again.

I cut him off, halving one of his inane sentences. "Should we get a hotel?"

"No. You need to keep going. If you do, you're going to get stuck there. This is a huge storm and I don't know how long it would last." This is not the answer I want to hear, so I hang up the phone.

My voice shakes when I say, "Let's go."

"You sure?" Ali's skin, in the slight light of the night and the snow and the headlights reflecting off the whiteness, is as pale as I feel inside. My stomach feels like it is in a total and uncontrolled skid throughout my body. I nod and flip my directional. A car flashes his headlights to let me go ahead. I tap the gas too hard and we skid, shaking like a metronome, first to the left then back again. I pull the car back on control.

"I'm okay. Sorry. Heavy foot." I try to laugh but no sound comes out. When I swallow, I taste the leftovers and bile. I think that perhaps that hell's banquet features the Wendy's chicken as the main course. I straighten the car out and role down the highway. Cars form three lanes that are based more on faith than the lines on the road. But the roads are clearer than they were within the Richmond city limits. We keep driving, slow and careful. The car seems to have gained more traction after our pit stop. From Manassas on, the roads calm down, plows start coming by with occasional regularity. I want to get home so badly. I speed up, going from 35 to 40, even 45 miles per hour. My body feels calmer, everything seems more normal than it had since this morning.

But in my haste to get home, I take the wrong exit. I mean to take the Lorton exit that is right next to my house. Instead, because of the eagerness, the darkness, and some confusing roadwork, I take the exit before it. The Mustang will now have to hold on through the industrial area, past the fields where I played little league baseball and the houses of high school friends who I no longer speak with. The road feels so dark, so malevolent. Keep on going. Almost there. Just another ten

minutes. Ali rubs my shoulder and her touch is warm and everything, despite the dark, feels right. Everything feels a little confused, considering how many times I've driven this road and how anomalous this trip has been.

We are just two turns and a stoplight from my home. Coming up along a one-lane bend with no streetlights, my eyes lose the edge of the road, just for a heartbeat. When my headlight beams flash across the white line, obscured by snow and darkness, my hands immediately correct because the car is heading towards the woods. A minivan rolls by, heading the other direction. When I pull the wheel back to the left, the rear tires give totally. The car flails, turning so it is almost perpendicular with the direction it should be traveling. In my headlights, I see another car. I am pinned between two minivans, neither traveling fast; my tires have no traction. My car is out of control. My hand instinctively jerks the wheel back towards the right, towards the trees. The car spins back out of the way of the minivan. One more little jerk to the left and we clear both minivans, just by a few feet. The fishtail is over. The entire motion of the Mustang is seamless. Ali asks if I'm okay. When I shake my head, she asks again. I respond more emphatically that I'm fine.

We cruise through an intersection and slowly make two lefts to come into my neighborhood. I take my foot off the gas pedal and let the car coast down into the parking spot directly in front of my house.

"See. We're home. We're safe." Ali's voice is tough and defiant, but I don't know if it's more for my benefit or for hers. With my luck, I'll fall and bust my ass as I get out of the car. Safe is inside, behind the warm brown of my front door.

Walking around the front of the car, I look at my headlights. They are totally caked with ice. The beams only extend a few feet out from the front of vehicle. A battery-powered flashlight would be more good. I kick off the ice, pat the car on the frozen hood. Pulling some bags from the back, I lug them inside. Ali waits for me next to my mom's gaudy Christmas decorations, the cheap dressed up mice and a toy Santa Claus.

"We're home." I hold her in my arms for a long moment. Then I go to get a coke to wash the taste of reused Wendy's chicken out of my mouth.

Sydney Zuerlein

Changed Utterly: The Development of Meaning in Yeats' "Easter, 1916"

"I am trying to write a poem on the men executed – 'terrible beauty has been born again' . . . I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me . . ." wrote W.B. Yeats to Lady Gregory in 1916 after the Easter Rising. Known as a "military failure," the uprising cost the lives of 450 Irish, 103 English, not to mention the thousands wounded. The Easter Rising may have seemed a military failure, but the deaths of the men involved were not in vain. Maud Gonne believed their sacrifice restored a "tragic dignity" to Ireland. In the now famous poem, "Easter, 1916," Yeats immortalizes the leaders of the uprising, many of whom he knew personally. The purpose of their deaths is one of the poem's themes. Yeats examines the bitter universal truth that nothing can be born unless something else dies. In this poem, "a terrible beauty is born." "Terrible beauty" is a brilliant oxymoron, but both words are so banal that their meaning is at first ambiguous. Seamus Heaney believes that poems are like archeological digs, they contain layers of meaning and new discoveries await those who delve deeper into them. The refrain, "... changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born," is the key to unearthing the strata of meaning in "Easter, 1916." Each time the poet repeats the refrain, he refers to the material of the stanza: the things changed by the uprising. Yet the terrible beauty remains an uncomfortable, ambiguous presence until the third stanza where Yeats' imagery makes everything clear: seen in relation to both Yeats' other work and to Irish mythology, the unchanging stone is itself the "terrible beauty."

In a letter to an Irish-American correspondent, Yeats expressed his belief that "We have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men. A world seems to have been swept away." In the first and second stanza there is tension between what was and what might have been, between what Ireland's finest men might have achieved had they lived and what their heroic deaths achieved. There is a poignant sense of disillusionment and loss. The poetic exploration begins in the first stanza with the world that has been swept away. It is a liminal world, on the verge of night: "at the close of day . . . among grey/ Eighteenth-century houses." The grey old houses of Dublin evoke an era that has already passed, an era of far-flown romantic and gothic imagination on the part of the English concerning the Celtic island; it is epitomized by literature such as Lady Morgan's The Wild Irish Girl and satirized by the writings of

Maria Edgeworth. It is also the time of the Act of Union between England and Ireland, though Ireland had been subject to England's rule for several centuries already. In one of his early poems, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," Yeats writes, "Of old the world on dreaming fed;/ Grey Truth is now her painted toy." This reflects the dreariness of the world in which "Easter, 1916" begins, the Dublin of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The speaker of the poem recalls meeting the revolutionary leaders at the end of a mundane day. While exchanging "polite meaningless words," he mentally notes some satiric bit of jocundity he will repeat to his pals at the pub that night. The speaker says he was "certain that they and I/ But lived where motley is worn." This is evocative of the stage Irishman of English theater, a stereotype playwright George Bernard Shaw exposed in dramas such as John Bull's Other Island. "Where are now the warring kings?" asks "The Song of the Happy Shepherd." "Of old the world on dreaming fed…" The dream is over now; the glories of Celtic Ireland are long past and even the rebel leaders' fellow Irishman fail to take them seriously. Words themselves have no meaning in this world, neither the polite words that the men exchange, nor even the powerful rhetoric of rebel leader Patrick Pearse. But all that changes; the Irish rebels do take themselves seriously, a fact they show the world on Easter Monday 1916 and continue to prove during the four ensuing days. "All changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible Beauty is born."

It is a world weary from centuries of English domination, the springs of its own identity dried up, replaced by stereotypes, a world that speaks a language no longer carrying any meaning that is now swept away for good, as in a flash flood. The word, "utterly," speaks of the irrevocability of the change the uprising has wrought. It is a profoundly beautiful thing that "grey truth" has changed, yet there is still the havoc political activism wreaks and there is still the void that the loss of so many gifted men has created, which nothing can ever fill.

The poet explores this theme in the second stanza of "Easter, 1916" with a tone that conveys a mixture of bitterness and reverence. He remembers the lost beauty of Countess Markievicz, whom he knew has Constance Gore-Booth when she was a young woman. He terms her political activism, "ignorant good will." Though Yeats participated in politics off and on throughout his life, he disliked politics because it destroys "many lovely things," including the beauty and sweet voices of women such as Constance as well as Yeats' life-long love and muse, Maud Gonne.

Words such as "ignorant," "argument," and "shrill," convey the speaker's bitterness, a tone that continues as Yeats' writes of his fellow poets, Patrick

Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh, two of the sixteen leaders executed by the English: "This man had kept a school/ And road our winged horse;/ This other his helper and friend/ Was coming into his force;/ He might have won fame in the end,/ So sensitive his nature seemed, so daring and sweet his thought." The poet laments the contribution to the arts these men might have made and is disillusioned with the political goals for which they died. Mr. O'Brien, in his article entitled "The Embers of Easter," written fifty years after the uprising, states,

...a few...brave and logical young men went to their death for Pearse's Republic, in whose attainability they had been allowed and even encouraged to believe. They saw clearly that the national territory was not being integrated by semantic exercises; they tried force, sanctioned as they believed by the example of Pearse and Connolly, and they died for the fantasy of a United Ireland at the hands of one or other of the governments which rule the Ireland of reality.

Yeats writes in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," "Then nowise worship dusty deeds,/ Nor seek . . . To hunger fiercely after truth,/ lest all thy toiling only breeds/ New dreams, new dreams..." The toiling of Constance, Pearse, MacDonagh, and the other leaders bred new dreams and death.

The sense of loss this poem conveys is keen, yet a tone of wonder and reverence inserts itself in the following lines, as the poem memorializes Major John MacBride, the husband of Maud Gonne and enemy of Yeats. The poet's words, "This other man I had dreamed/ A drunken, vainglorious lout. . ." draws attention to the dichotomy between personal perspective and reality. "He, too, has resigned his part/ In the casual comedy;/ He too has been changed in his turn,/ Transformed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born." These men's deaths metamorphosed even the vilest among them into heroes. The poet's use of the word, "resigned," suggests that the rebel leaders knew they were going to their deaths. In calling life a "casual comedy," Yeats looks back to "motley" in the previous stanza and all that it signifies; he also undermines his own admonition in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" to not seek "To hunger fiercely after truth," for if the lives of the Irish were a mere comedy, an insignificant act on a stage, is it not better that those leaders resigned their parts and became solid beings, honored in their deaths?

The unchangeable state of death segues into the image of the stone in the third stanza of "Eater, 1916." This is the only stanza in which Yeats does not repeat the refrain. Through the infrequent use of any heavy punctuation, the pauses between lines are shorter, causing the stanza to mimic the swift flow of a stream. It is also the stanza in which the tension is the most visceral; the

poet creates a level of conflict amounting almost to anguish between the imagery of nature's swiftly moving cycles, conveyed by the increased rapidity and urgency of the stanza's rhythm, and the monumentality and immobility of the stone "in the midst of all."

"Hearts with one purpose alone/ Through summer and winter seem/ Enchanted to a stone/ to trouble the living stream." These lines, which are as hypnotically rhythmic as an incantation, seem to mean that the hearts of men like Pearse, MacDonagh, and MacBride have turned to stone because of their devotion to the dream of a free Ireland. This is one layer of the meaning certainly and the first lines of the fourth stanza support this: "Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart." Nevertheless, it is not all. Carmel Jordan links the stone image to two sources in Irish mythology. Jordan cites seventeenth-century historian Geoffrey Keating, who wrote of the origins of one of Ireland's appellations, "Inisfail," which means "Island of the stone of Destiny." The name is a derivation of "Lia Fail," the Stone of Destiny, which is one of four sacred talismans belonging to the Tuatha De Danaan, the people of the goddess, Dana, who were

...A race of druids and seers who ruled Ireland centuries before the coming of Christianity. All the kings of Ireland, both pagan and Christian, were crowned upon this inauguration stone and their destiny was tied in with the magical powers of the stone . . . in addition to the stone being "enchanted," it also had "fatal" qualities . . . it possessed the "terrible beauty" or Ireland herself and her long troubled history.

Thus, the stone to which the hearts of the rebel leaders are enchanted in "Easter, 1916" is the same Stone of Destiny to which was tied the destinies of all the kings of old Ireland. The stone is the terrible beauty of Yeats' poem.

Jordan's second mythological source is the goddess, Fail, who was believed to be a beautiful, but "fatal" woman. The earliest known Irish elegy was written about Fail; her name is obviously linked with the Stone of Destiny, Lia Fail. Both the stone motif and the motif of the fatal woman frequently recur throughout Yeats' work, even before "Easter, 1916." In some of his short stories, for instance, Yeats writes of a poet, Hanrahan, who was drawn away from his human love by the "fatal beauty" of Echtge, a woman of the Sidhe (the fairies of Irish lore). Predictably, Hanrahan meets with ecstasy then death at the hands of Echtge. Jordan writes, "Echtge clearly represents Ireland herself, for her emblem in the story is the Stone of Destiny, and like Ireland under British rule, she has lain for a long time asleep awaiting a virile patriot to awaken her." Another instance is Yeats' early play, Cathleen ni Hoolihan, in

which Maud Gonne played the heroine, an old peasant woman who personifies Ireland and also lures away a young man, who is about to be married, to fight her behalf. The same thing happens to the legendary warrior, Cuchulain, in Yeats' Cuchulain plays. Cuchulain even dies on a pillar of stone, tied to it by the veil of the woman of the Sidhe so that he might not escape. Additionally, Yeats likens Pearse fighting during the Easter Rising, to Cuchulain about to die on the Stone of Destiny.

Clearly the hearts "Enchanted to a stone" are the hearts of the rebel leaders, enchanted by the fatal beauty of Ireland; their destinies tied like the kings of old, to the Stone of Destiny, which troubles "the living stream." The leaders of the uprising have forfeited the glories they might have achieved through art or whatever else they might have done, and have died for Ireland. In a world that "of old on dreaming fed," a world ravaged by a War in which "young men die for old men's lies," an age sans heroes, the blood of a few Irish patriots births the terrible beauty, the dream of an Ireland, freed and glorious.

In "Easter, 1916," stone becomes the transition from the third stanza to the fourth. Here it acquires another layer of meaning and reintroduces the bitter tone suffused throughout the second stanza. "Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart./ O when may it suffice?/ That is Heaven's part, our part/ To murmur name upon name . . ." The living are left to grieve and to try not to become stone themselves in their bitterness over what has happened. The poet begins to ask questions. The first, "What is it but nightfall?/ No, no, not night but death," acts as a reminder of the finality of the changes the uprising has brought on. The second: "Was it needless death after all?" This implies two other questions; the first, could what was achieved by these men's deaths have been achieved another way? The answer is no. "We know their dream; enough/ To know they dreamed and are dead," says the speaker; he implies "it is enough to know..." This tells us that the rebels dreamed of more than Home Rule for Ireland. Theirs was the dream of a nation with an identity truly its own, truly Gaelic (after all, many of the leaders of rebellion also helped to begin the Gaelic revival). These lines also seem to ask, if dreaming led to these men's deaths, do we want any part of their dream? This relates to Seamus Heaney's poem, "Kinship" in which he calls Ireland, an "insatiable bride," who "swallows up our love and terror," or, in the less beauteous phraseology of Stephen Dedalus, "Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow." Regardless, the terrible beauty is born.

The final change in the poem is from impermanence to permanence and it is art that achieves it. "I write it out in a verse – / MacDonagh and MacBride/

and Connolly and Pearse . . . Are changed, changed utterly..." Carved in stone by the pen of the poet, the names of the mortals who died in the Easter Rising in 1916 have become immortal.

"Easter, 1916" is a testament, not just to an historic tragedy, but to the ability of art to help sort out and make sense of the calamitous and chaotic in history. It also ensures that the dead survive to speak into future generations. Delving into poetry is indeed like hunting for artifacts at an archeological site: each time the digger unearths a layer of meaning, the events of history take on a new dimension as the metaphors and symbols of the poem impart context, structure, and even the semblance of purpose to what has happened in the past. This is what Yeats was attempting to do throughout all of his work, which as a whole has incredible continuity. His work unifies the disparate themes found in Ireland's past and what was then Ireland's present, giving Ireland an identity that no revival or revolution succeeded in giving it. In one of his late poems, "Statues," Yeats wrote,

> When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
> What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,
> What calculation, number, measurement replied?
> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked,
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace,
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

One can see here how art can be a religion, answering the questions, however satisfactorily, that we cannot help asking, although we have turned from the old answers: from where do we come, where are we going, and why?

Works Cited

Jordan, Carmel. "The Stone Symbol is 'Easter 1916' and the Cuchulain Plays." College Literature 13.1 (1986): 36 – 43.

Joyce, James. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Malins, Edward. "Yeats and the Easter Rising." The Massachusetts Review 7.2 (Spring 1966): 271 – 284.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. "The Embers of Easter." The Massachusetts Review 17.4 (Autumn 1966): 621 – 637.

Yeats, W.B. Major Works. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Travis Mullis

Love and Death, Sex and Salvation

D.H. Lawrence's final novel, Lady Chatterley's Lover, begins with the line, "Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically." Lines fitting for a man who constantly found himself at odds with a world he felt was brutal, repressed and doomed to failure. Lawrence, the son of a barely literate coal miner, is considered one of the finest novelists in the English tradition. During his lifetime he was surrounded by controversy due to the sexual and graphic nature of some of his writing. Few readers today would find his work to be overly graphic; however, Lawrence was deemed a petty pornographer during his time, a time that was just starting to detach itself from the shackles of the Victorian mindset. His novels are what he is most remembered for; in them one finds Lawrence grappling with a world he felt was on the brink of destruction. His worldview took form in what many consider his best novel, Women in Love.

Women in Love is on the surface a story about, yep, you guessed it, women in love. Two sisters, Gudrun and Ursula Brangwen, fall in love with two separate men. Ursula, a school teacher, falls in love with a misanthrope, Rupert Birkin, while Ursula, an artist recently returned from London, finds herself enthralled by an industrialist, Gerald Crich. These two love affairs rise and fall, and rise and fall until the startling conclusion. Ursula and Rupert are the idealists of the story, two lovers who are trying to accomplish, as Birkin coins it, "freedom together". Gerald and Gudrun are a different story; their relationship is impeded by Gerald's domineering personality and Gudrun's strange sexual desire to dominate and be dominated. These two relationships beautifully portray Lawrence's worldview and ideas about sexuality and love's place in a rapidly industrializing world. Gerald mines coal and seeks material wealth at any cost. Rupert is an artist striving to come to terms with a world he deems inhumane and tragically flawed. Often times Rupert is a simple vehicle for Lawrence's philosophy, especially when he says

things like: "Let mankind pass away--time it did. The creative utterances will not cease, they will only be there. Humanity doesn't embody the utterance of the incomprehensible any more. Humanity is a dead letter. There will be a new embodiment, in a new way. Let humanity disappear as quick as possible." The judgmental nature of this line and others like it turns some people away from Lawrence, however, if you can stomach his beliefs you can come to understand what it is he was trying to do and say. Women in Love can change the way you look at the world. Its descriptive powers can draw you back to a time not very different than our own.

Lawrence lived during a time of immense social upheaval. 1/4th of the British men who went to fight in WWI never came home. More than 35 million people became casualties of a war that accomplished very little. The Victorian age was over and the lingering modesty it had left behind was beginning to crumble. Conservative values were being challenged by a new generation of thinkers who had abandoned their faith in reason and progress. Lawrence also saw his beloved countryside ruined by industrialization that brutalized millions of British workers and their families, Lawrence's included. All in all, the world had gone topsy-turvy; the entire future of the human race was in the air. Lawrence was sick of all of it and wanted to find a cure for humanity's many ailments. He developed his cure in his writing, in which Women in Love became one of the prime laboratories for his experimentations in thought.

As the story of Women in Love progresses Birkin and Ursula find themselves falling in love and practicing the kind of relationship that Lawrence tried all his life to champion, a relationship where the partners were equal, the sex was magnificent, and each partner's personalities were intact and distinct. Lawrence's passages unfold with unrelenting passion and lyricism. His sentences roll on forever like the English hills of the story. Many Lawrence acolytes have taken his new ethic as a justification for free love between multiple partners, however, Lawrence strongly believed in the monogamous relationship and would have frowned upon the practices of the hippies, and their new age descendants. While Birkin and Ursula rise and converge, Gerald and

Gudrun flounder and fight. These two dynamos cannot find a common ground on which to stand. Their cold and brutal sex is described as unfulfilling and humiliating. It isn't at all the "tender-hearted fucking" that Lawrence thought would help cure the human race. The end of the novel finds the two couples together on vacation in the Alps where things do not go as planned. Without giving too much away, I will only say that the novel ends with an apocalyptic flourish that only Lawrence could have imagined.

So, with that said, why read Women in Love? For the same reason you should read anything that Lawrence wrote, to explore one gifted man's vision of reality, a reality where humans are more humane, where sex is more loving, where life is more passionately lived, and where ideas are more caring. Women in Love is really only part of a trilogy of ideas that begins with The Rainbow and culminates in Lady Chatterley's Lover. All of these books are connected by Lawrence's unabashed comments on the human condition.

If you're anything like me, D.H. Lawrence will change your life; however, you have to let him change your life. His ideas may not seem so radical today, and yet, his worldview has still not been achieved. Relationships are still fraught with dishonesty and disloyalty. We still destroy the planet and each other. It might be a good thing that Lawrence died before he could witness the unrelenting slaughter of World War II. I think it would have broken his heart. When you step back and look at Women in Love you see a book and an author trying very hard to spread love into all the cruel and dark corners of the human psyche. Lawrence was a lover who died too young and with too much left unsaid. Lawrence tried to do with his writing what the Greek poet Aeschylus said should be the goal of all human beings, "to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world." After reading Women in Love I think you will agree.

Dion Berry

Virgin

"So, what kind of music do you listen to?" the brown-haired girl asks. I cringe slightly and hope she doesn't notice my agitated swagger. Deep down, I want to scoff at her and start listing all the bands I love, most of which she's probably never heard, reveling in how my taste in music is so obviously superior to her own. Relax, I tell myself. You just met this girl. Right now, I have to be flirty, so as not to lose her attention. A low attention span. That's probably why she listens to such shitty music. I've yet to find out exactly what kind of music she listens to.

"Um, I'm mostly into indie rock and folk," I reply. In my head, I quickly apologize to every artist I listen to who doesn't fit that abridged version of my tastes. "If you want, I can make you a mix CD sometime." She excitedly accepts the offer. Girls love mix CD's. They have since the dawn of time. The mental image of someone sitting down at a laptop and meticulously crafting a collection of songs to perfectly amuse another person is, to say the least, appealing. Then again, I'm sure a normal guy would just put a bunch of cheesy love songs on a CD and hand it off to a girl he's trying to fuck, tongue placed firmly in cheek, hoping to make the metaphor literal. I don't. Music can speak to people, so I'm very careful about what I say and how I say it.

We chat a bit longer and then start to say our goodbyes. "It was a grand delight to make your acquaintance," I say, purposely overdoing the goodbye so as to make her laugh. "I do bid thee reunite with me ere the sun rises." Now, you just sound stupid.

She laughs generously and begins skipping away. "Don't forget my CD!" She yells jokingly without turning back to me. "It'll be my first one ever!" This time, it's impossible to hide the agitation, and I'm suddenly relieved she didn't bother turning around. If I had known it would be her first mix, I wouldn't have so quickly offered to make one for her. I barely know this girl; I'm not qualified to pop her mix CD cherry. One's first mix CD should come from someone who knows and loves them. Alas, I'm trapped.

Ten minutes later, iTunes is feverishly running on my laptop, caus-

ing the cooling fan to hiss in irritation. In a sea of blue and white, I fish for the perfect combination of songs, like a florist putting together a bouquet. I pass over songs I dislike, songs I like, and songs I love. No, these songs have to be not only perfect, but perfect for each other. If she knew how obsessively you were working on this mix she'd- I don't bother finishing the thought. To her, it may be strange to be so dedicated to putting together a silly mix CD, but I want desperately to make her first mix as special as mine was.

When I was fourteen, I started high school in a new district. I didn't mind it much, as I didn't have any friends throughout my middle school years (I was the typical outsider, before it was cool to be one). I saw high school as a fresh start, but after three weeks of classes, I had yet to make a single friend. Everyday in Algebra I, the class where most kids shirked their work and opted instead to socialize, I buried my head into a three-ring binder full of loose leaf paper, writing shitty rap songs and pretending to be Jay-Z. Put a Jay-Z song on her mix.

Beside me, there sat an overweight, acne-covered kid with greasy hair. He, like me, always wrote in his journal during class. His name was Brian. I hated him because he was a loner, just like me but still somehow too picky to be my friend. I wanted very badly each day to grab him by his shoulders, shake him violently, and yell, "Beggars can't be choosers! Let's be best friends!" He seemed almost too much like me though, and whenever I looked at him, I felt as if I was staring into a mirror, reflecting not just the physical appearance, but the emotional as well. It was all at once thrilling and frightening, although at the time, I just thought I was gay. It would've made sense, after all. No one ever talked to me, much less girls.

Then, one day, something was different. Perhaps there were no parties the weekend before, so the class had nothing interesting to talk about. Maybe the malicious nature of adolescents reared its ugly head and the other teens in the class wanted to make a joke out of me. Still, maybe they were just legitimately interested in dragging me out of my loneliness. Whatever the reason, two of the most popular students in the class asked me what I was always writing in my notebook.

"Uh, it's just some rap shit I do," I said, trying my best to sound

nonchalant.

"You rap?" asked the shorter one. His name was Matt, or Eric, some typical middle-class, white name, as common a first name as Smith is a last name. No mix CD is complete without something from Elliott Smith.

"A little," I answered more timidly than I intended. "It's just a hobby, really." I dreaded hearing what I knew was coming next.

"Well, rap for us!" the taller one commanded loudly enough for the entire classroom to hear. Before I had time to think of a way out of it, most of the students in the class had gathered around my desk, repeating like parrots the command of the taller kid. Our teacher sat quietly at his desk as he did everyday, filling out paperwork, organizing tennis practice for the following day, doing pretty much anything but teaching his students algebra. Without him to break up the stimulation-starved mob, I was without an out, a loner thrust into the spotlight without any clue as to what to do. That reminds me, I should add a Weezer song.

"I rap too!" came a voice from beside me. It was Brian, my doppelganger, or perhaps my evil twin. He picked up his notebook and stood up on stubby legs. "I hereby challenge you to a rap battle, fool!"

I didn't know what to say. Not only was the challenge unexpected, it was just as over-the-top and corny, as well. Although seconds ago I had been searching for a way out of rapping, I found myself enraged that someone I didn't even know was trying to steal the spotlight from me. I really couldn't blame him though; I had hesitated, and he had rightfully taken advantage of the moment.

The other students were even more excited now. For twenty sheltered, gated-community snobs, the concept of seeing a real live rap battle was just too tantalizing, too "urban" to pass up. I felt like I was in 8 Mile, except I didn't get to have sex with Brittany Murphy.

I no longer had a choice in the matter. Someone started beating on a table and the battle had begun. Brian went first. I don't remember much of what he said, but he tried to rhyme "Dracula," "Blackula," and "spatula," in a rhythm so awkward and off-time, Soulja Boy himself would've had to take notice. Although he stumbled over his words, he rocked back and forth with a confidence I'd never seen before, as if for a

minute there, he'd lost himself. I wonder if she'd like Radiohead? I noticed for the first time that there was a key difference between Brian and myself; he belonged there in the spotlight. Surrounded by this gaggle of adolescents, he seemed at home, whereas I was just visiting. No matter how bad his rhymes were, after each one, he'd point a stubby finger at me triumphantly. Once he finished rapping, a look of accomplishment washed over his face, followed by a look of disappointment at the fact that no one seemed to be as impressed by him as he was with himself.

The beat came to me and I caught it with ease. When I say I had spent hours writing and practicing raps, I wasn't joking. Although lame, my lyrics were, apparently, good enough to impress the group. I was declared the winner. Still, I felt as if I'd lost. I may have been a better rapper, but the stage belonged to Brian.

He and I talked for the rest of the day, the parallels of our lives unfolding for the first time. We both had transferred to this school from other districts and had grown up in the same neighborhood, although we'd never met before. He talked to me about music, telling me about all the bands he loved that I'd never heard of. The next day, he gave me my first mix CD.

I didn't like a lot of the music, at first. I found it boring, incomprehensible, and dense, but the more I returned to it, the more I enjoyed it. Soon, I loved almost every song. Each night, I'd play the CD through my headphones, digesting second after second of melodies I'd never imagined existed. Despite that they once seemed obscure, the lyrics soon became more beautiful to me than Shakespeare. I began to desperately seek more obscure music and started making mix CD's for myself. These plastic discs came to define my life. I took them personally, as if they were a part of my personality. It wasn't long before I developed an arrogance about them. I felt that if someone rejected these songs, they were rejecting me.

One of these songs in particular was by Neutral Milk Hotel. It was called "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea." This became a theme song of sorts for Brian's and my friendship. The song is about finding happiness in being young because "one day we will die and our ashes will fly from the aeroplane over the sea." I absolutely have to put this song on

the mix CD. As we grew older, a lot of things changed. We continued to make mix CD's for each other, even when my dad developed a drug addiction and Brian's sister was committed to a psych ward. The mix CD's were a way to remind each other of the beauty of our youth, that no matter how far away from it we got, music could bring us back to that Algebra classroom where we first met as teenagers. At eighteen, we both went off to college but continued to bring a mix CD along for every occasional visit to the other's campus.

I lean back in my wooden chair as my eyes scroll up and down the completed playlist. Although I'm tempted to continue tampering with the order of the songs, I resist the urge and allow the marriage of music to sit in front of me, growing more beautiful with each passing second. This may be your best mix CD ever. I open my drawer and dig through wads of balled up paper and assorted school supplies until I find my blank CD's. Just then, my phone vibrates. It's the brown-haired girl. I smile to myself as I pop the blank CD into my laptop, knowing full well that I'm about to do for her what Brian did for me.

The last time I saw Brian, I had prepared a particularly good mix CD to share with him. Upon arrival to his dorm room, I offered him the CD, expecting to get one in return. Instead, he offered me cocaine. I don't know when Brian started doing hard drugs but he really hasn't seemed the same since. No longer does he live for the spotlight. He lives for coke and acid. When we talk, he doesn't ramble on about his latest favorite band anymore. He just brags about how high he was the night before. It's hard to watch your heroes fall, but it's a little easier if you know that you're better for having known them. I don't make mix CD's because I'm a pretentious jack-off who thinks everyone's taste in music should match my own. I do it because I know I have the ability to be to someone else what Brian was to me, to be someone's hero. Brian may have found a new love in controlled substances but, to me, there is no better high than giving someone a mix CD and hearing their grateful reaction upon first listen.

"It's a little pretentious," she said.

Victoria Moreland

Simple is Good

Molly-dog sleeps in the passenger seat next to me. I rub her head as I snake though the mountains. I think of my husband and daughter at home, only an hour and a half by car, yet it feels as if they are on a distant planet. I have come to the North Carolina mountains with my dog to escape the realities of home.

Waylon sings with Willie, and I sing along. I crank up the volume on the CD my father made and listen to Waylon Jennings wail about the shortness of life and his contribution to shortening his own. I remember Dad sitting at his computer searching on Napster for songs, everything from Merle Haggard to Hot Chocolate, to burn to CD. Molly opens her eyes and her ears stand straight at the sound of Waylon's heavy base. I adjust the volume. We listened to this song at my father's memorial service, knowing that church hymns would not suit him during his passage to the afterlife.

While driving between the Cascades trail and The Lump overlook, I pass a church and cemetery in a small hollow. The cemetery is dotted with headstones, which seem simple and small compared to the ones my mother, brother, and I browsed at Patterson Monument Company in Carbon Hill, Alabama. Four months ago, we shopped for a marker for Dad at the white clapboard house, the yard filled with headstones of various sizes and color. Mr. Patterson's daughter, a petite woman with bleach-blonde hair, helped us decide on the stone to mark his grave in a family plot outside Parrish, Alabama.

"Trust me," she had said. "You don't want marble. Turns black, then people complain about trying to keep it clean." She sat behind a veneer desk littered with various forms and papers.

Her grandson had marched in during the middle of our meeting. "The television won't work," he told his grandmother and she told him to entertain himself. "I've got business," she said with her thick Appalachian accent, the "b" of business stretched out with emphasis. Her grandson stomped out muttering, "I want to watch Animal Planet."

"Kids," she said and rolled her eyes.

My mother looked down and fiddled with her hands, the gold of her wedding band glowed from the light of the sun streaming through the window. Despite the circumstances in which we found ourselves, we snickered at the exchange between the grandson and grandmother. We've all been there we said in one way or another.

We learned about the different colors of stones, the etchings, the inflated prices based on the availability of stone. Other customers milled about in the yard visible from the window behind us. Business seemed to be booming. "Simple is good," she told us. This was a family business, three generations to be exact, so she was the authority. "Trust me. I've seen lots of ugly stones."

My mother has always had impeccable taste and her selection of a marker for my father was no different. This was the stone where her name would be etched next to his. Mother selected a dark granite double headstone, a recessed box in the back would read "Pennington." Because of the process of ordering and inscribing the stone, we would be unable to see it before we left Alabama. We would have to return at a later date to see the stone that marked his grave.

The road unfurls before me and I turn right at mile marker 273, follow the curve of the asphalt past the farm, and left onto a gravel road. Three days ago, I thought I would be making this trip alone, as Molly recovered in an animal hospital from pancreatitis. Losing my father and the prospect of losing my dog was like a bad country song that I didn't want to live. Molly is my second rat terrier. Sissy, my first, I had to put down a couple of years ago when her liver began to fail. I grieved for weeks, missing the sound of her nails clicking on the hardwood floors of our house. Molly seemed to mourn the loss, too: she moped aimlessly around the house, slept more, and seemed unsure of what to do when she went out into our backyard alone.

The mourning I had then and the concern for the dog that remains feels silly when I know the loss cannot equate with the hole my father has left. I think of Dad when I listen to this music, when I finger his wedding band on my dresser at home, when I drive thru these

mountains that I first saw with him.

My first trip on the Blue Ridge was with Dad, when he chose to drive through the mountains of Virginia on a trip back from Connecticut. I have the picture he took as the rest of my family sat on the stacked stone at one of the overlooks. I am a bored, lanky teenager clutching my dachshund, sitting next to my brother and mother as the wind blows our hair in all different directions. Then I only wanted to return to my friends and the busy social life of a teenager, grateful that Dad never stopped for long when we traveled. He was all about driving and seeing as much as he could from the road.

When I married, my husband and I took road trips and stopped to hike through the forests I had only seen from a distance with my father. I welcomed the crunch of leaves under my feet and often remarked about how much my father would have enjoyed the woods we traversed. But my father's failing health and steadfast ways would not allow him the joy of walking through a forest filled with tall, fat firs. Dad's idea of hiking was not using a golf cart when he played golf. His hikes consisted of tee boxes and fairways, his latest driver in hand.

We arrive at the cabin and Molly hops into my lap, ready to exit the car. We spend our afternoons this way, driving on the parkway, taking a short hike, and returning to a small patch of green outside our temporary home. Molly scoots across the grass on her back as I unlock the front door to the cabin. I leave to get a beer and return to the porch where I sip and listen to the wings of hummingbirds circling the feeder hanging from the rafter above me. Molly perks up, sniffs the breeze, and finds yet another spot to roll onto. She seems much better than she did four days ago when she continually vomited yellow bile and could barely stand, but I know from experience that her condition could quickly change.

My father's health was often the same, quick changes from manageable illness to mysterious ailments that impeded his everyday activities. Thanks to a generous health insurance policy, my father's life was prolonged by the advances of medical science. He was a human experiment with a defibulator in his chest designed to shock his heart back into rhythm should he need it. On two occasions, the device

proved to be faulty as it shocked him over twenty times. We watched him flinch with pain as the electric shock from the small machine jolted his heart repeatedly and unnecessarily. On another occasion, he spent a night in a crypt of oxygen when he suffered a stroke in his eye. Dad often remarked that he was humbled by all the medical treatment he received, wondering aloud how he had been so fortunate to be blessed with the attention of his doctors. He called himself an enigma of modern medicine. With each health issue, my father recovered to return to the golf course and the careful attention of my mother, which often irritated him. With every recovery, there was the return of a condition, one we thought he had overcome.

As my father aged, the gap between recovery and relapse narrowed. The day before my father died, he showed signs of a rebound. I took him coffee and an oatmeal cookie as he sat in the office chair at the dressing table in my parent's large bathroom. Later that night, he would die in that same chair and fall to the floor as my mother watched in horror. But that afternoon I saw him, he smiled, said thank you, sipped his coffee, and ate his cookie. When he finished, I held him up as he fumbled back to bed, and I kissed his cheek. "I have to go home," I had told him. "Do you want me to close the door so you can sleep?"

"Just crack it open," he had said. He adjusted the sheets and lay his head back on his pillow. "I love you, baby girl."

It was the last exchange I had with my father. Hardly remarkable, hardly different I know, but it is a memory that I hold onto when the loss feels too fresh. I am not a stranger to loss. You could say that it was loss that tethered my father to me. When I was an eight-week-old infant, my father survived a car accident that killed my birthmother. He was a twenty-four-year-old widower with an infant daughter and an honorable discharge from the Air Force. For almost three years, it was just Dad and me. The bond forged between us because of our shared loss, his loss more acute than mine, is stronger than any tie I have ever known. I am forever attached to my daughter and my husband, but it is different. My father had suffered a great loss and my life was his reason to live. The burden of being his reason was heavy at times,

especially when I felt that I had failed him because of some bad choice I had made. His reason for life expanded when he married my mother, a double blessing that gave me a mother's love and later a brother to bother.

When my father died, I lost the stories about my birthmother and how she loved me those brief eight weeks. No more stories about me and him riding around as we traveled from place to place. He would not rub my head again and mess up my hair, something that made him giggle as I tried vainly to fix my do.

For weeks after my father's death, I heard his voice telling me some mundane little something and calling me "baby girl," convinced that I had made up the phrase. My brother confirmed that my father had said it often. Months later, when I helped my mother with yard work, I heard Dad's laughter as I struggled with a wheelbarrow in their garage. My mother still hears the doorbell ring every morning. As we watched a University of Alabama football game at my brother's house, a red balloon, a party favor for my brother's birthday, floated into the room and rested at the chair my father once preferred. We cheered on my father's alma mater, and the red balloon remained at the chair's side. There is probably a logical explanation for these occurrences, some synapse in my brain that fires off these memories of his laughter and voice, but I hope it is Dad haunting my family and me, resisting the urge to leave us completely.

I feel his presence even here in this place that he has never been. I lay my head on the back of the rocker and breathe in the fresh mountain air. Molly returns with a tennis ball that she has found in the yard. The ball bounces under the rocker and she barks, shrill and loud. I stop the rocking and hurl the ball. A red-throated hummingbird hovers and watches me, his stomach fat and full. The black blur of his wings hum as he zooms toward the feeder. My father passed away over four months ago. He is buried on a hilltop in north Alabama. The sun rises and sets on his headstone I have yet to see.

Art

Breanna Stallings

What are Your Flies? The Things that Bite, Sting and Annoy You

(Mixed Media)

Breanna Stallings

Vintage Kimono

(Photograph)

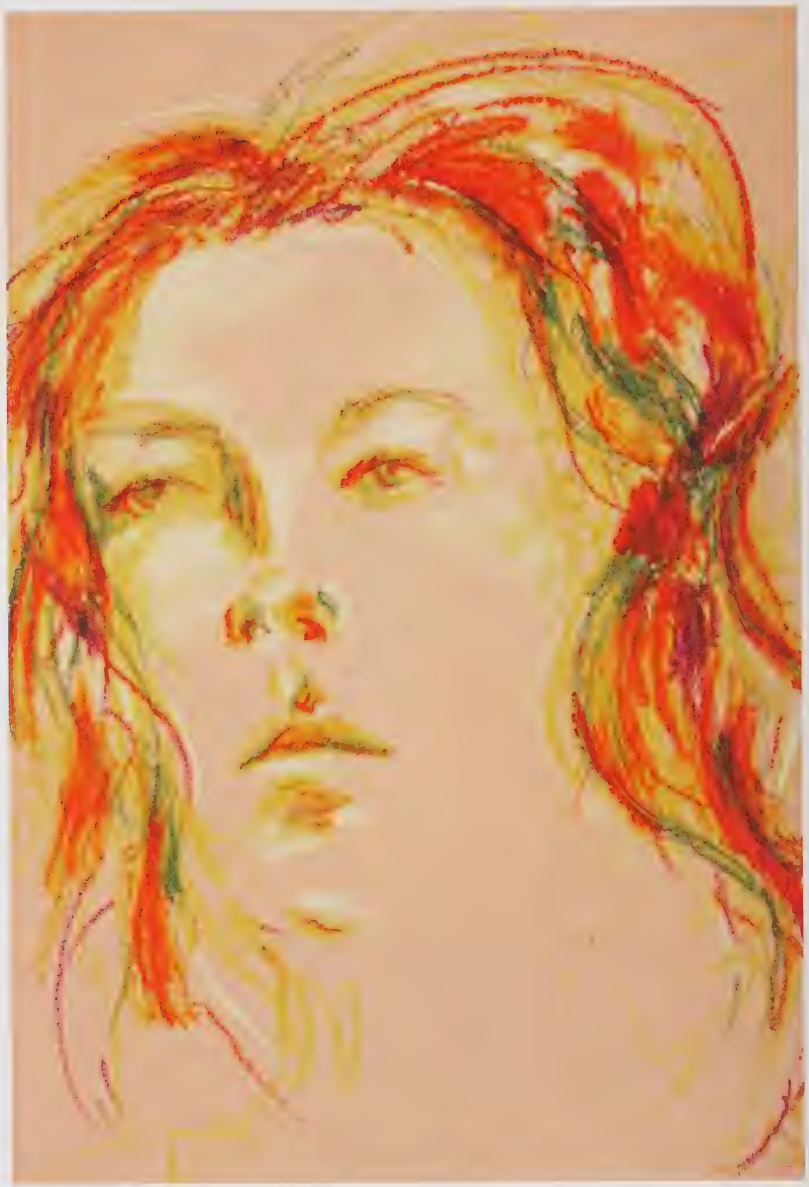
Breanna Stallings

Falling

(Watercolor)

Breanna Stallings

Abstract Portrait



(Mixed Media)

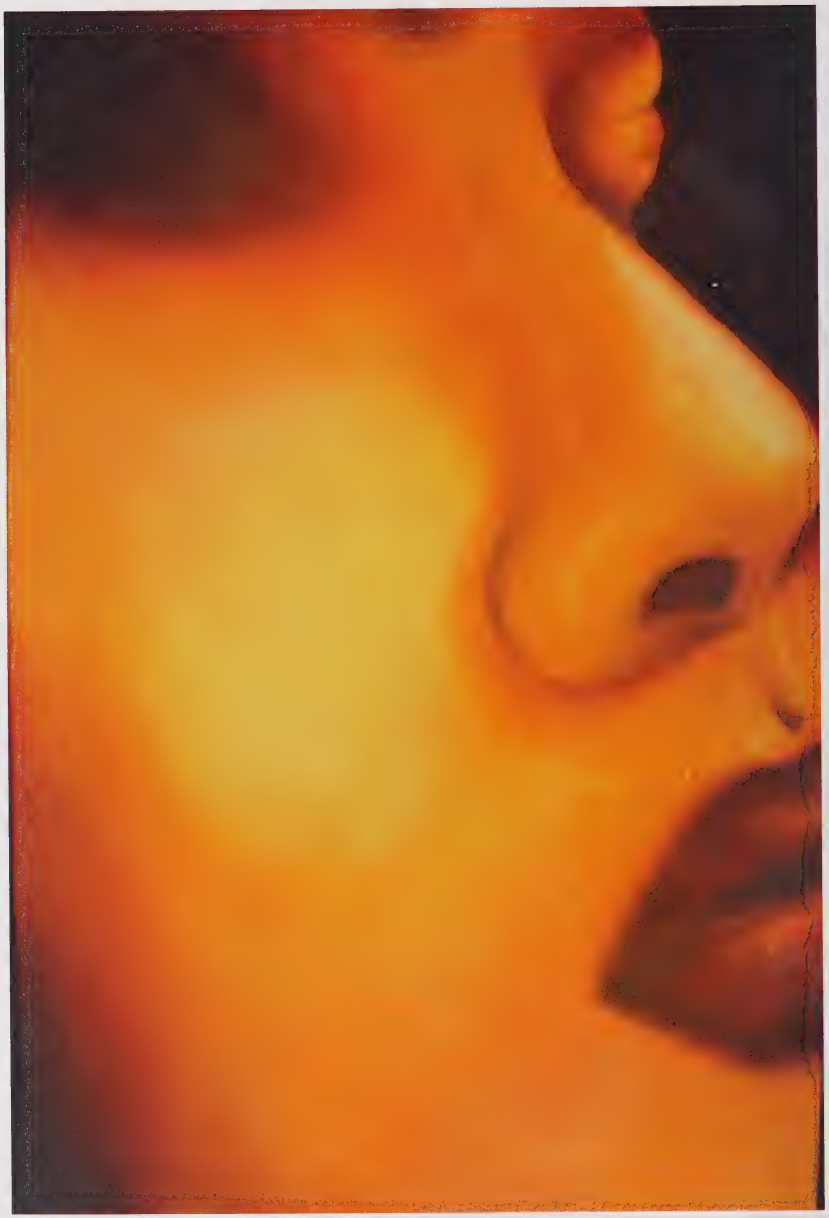
Breanna Stallings

Leaf Constellations

(Mixed Media)

Breanna Stallings

Blind Eye



(Oil on Canvas)

Breanna Stallings

Corporate Sellout

(Mixed Media)

Breanna Stallings

Regina

(Pen & Ink)

Nicole Beno Pietrantonio

Black & White Gorilla

(Photograph)

Nathan Fields

ME

(Photograph)

Justin Lafreniere

You Can Find Anything You Want In a Forest If You Just Look Hard Enough

(Photograph)

Justin Lafreniere

The View Down the Line

(Photograph)

QUEENS UNIVERSITY
OF CHARLOTTE